

# LOOKING FOR RISTO

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# Abstract

Along the summer 2012, Tristan Hamel went for a journey on the lakes of Eastern Finland on his self-made raft, looking for his Finnish alter ego Risto. The aim of this project is to question identification with the natural environment, and more particularly the condition of identification of a foreigner with Finnish nature. The central proposition of this Master's thesis is that a complete engagement with the environment is needed to challenge national strategies of identification. Understood both as a physical and psychological process, engagement makes it possible for one to initiate a one-to-one relationship with nature, based on a personal cultural set such as the universal myth of return to nature.

The artwork at stake in this thesis builds upon the international tradition of environmental art but is more particularly influenced by the work of selected Finnish artists whose work is marked by a deep sense of involvement with the natural environment. In spite of these various influences, Looking for Risto intends to innovate mostly in terms of documentation, by taking advantage of recent developments in communication technologies. Art being considered as a process, the emphasis is put as much on the preparatory and retrospective phases of the project as on the production one. Each of them is assigned a different mode of confrontation with the audience.





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# Note to the reader

Although this book is first and foremost a Master's thesis, the reader who would be more interested in the artistic side of the project is invited to directly consult the central part of the book, *Here*.

For those who wish to explore the text in its entirety, it is advised to have a look at the video clips which were produced during the journey in order to have a better understanding of what the project consists of.

All the videos are available at the following URL:

<https://vimeo.com/channels/lookingforristo>



# INTRODUCTION

Risto was the name some older Finns assigned me years ago as they failed to remember my real name or had difficulties to pronounce it. It gradually became part of me as nowadays many people know me under this name. In a way, it is the Finnish part of myself although it grew to become a character of its own. To go after him should be understood as a metaphor: it is to go after the Finnish identity markers I may carry inside myself. And from there a question: is it possible at all for a foreigner, whose roots are only loosely defined, to identify with Finnish natural environment?

Identity and the notion of place are closely intertwined. When meeting a new person, one of the most common questions, besides asking for one's name, is to ask where one is from. Still, is it always relevant? Although I have a French passport, although people see me chiefly as a French, I may actually feel otherwise, or to be more precise not feel only French. In the end, I have lived in France for less than half of my life. I know my country but the

places where I feel at home may not be in France. I am familiar with France but the environments I know best are not there. In fact, there is no place dearer to me than the Finnish forest. I first encountered it at the occasion of a trip around the Nordic countries while I was still a teenager. Since that time, I have kept coming back to it until it kept me close for good. After hanging around many places in Finland, spending time in the scattered and low forests of Lapland, crossing the endless and flat lands around the bay of Bothnia, I found myself most at ease in the Savo region. There the land is rockier than in the West. Trees are taller than in Lapland. The forest grounds are dryer than in Carelian marshes. The forest intimately mingles with the lakes and forms an incredible net of lace. Savo is a region that is best discovered by boat. One can travel for hundreds of kilometres and reach deserted islands where, even in the heart of the summer, there is no one but beavers and black grouse to disturb lonely hours under the shadow of a tormented and majestic pine tree.

The special relationship I maintain with Finnish nature appear as contradicting, at first sight, with me being French. Still, does it make me Finn? Does one have to be called Risto instead of Tristan to legitimately see in the lakes of Eastern Finland a significant part of himself? From there stems the will to investigate the notion of identity, simply defined as what makes me me, or on a collective level, what makes us us. Under which conditions one can one feel bounded to a specific place? What are the sources of someone's identity? Is it possible to identify with a given place without originating from this place? How was nature historically apprehended in relation to identities? These are but few questions I intend to

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consider in this thesis. They all revolve around the confrontation between local and cosmopolitan sources of identity. To be Finnish, to live in Savo, does not make one necessarily close to nature, what matters is to engage with the natural environment. Otherwise, nature remains a concept and identification is not so much with an environment but with the idea of it. In short, the main proposition of this thesis is that identification with Finnish nature is not necessarily the outcome of a national tradition but can as well stem from cosmopolitan cultural origins, at the condition of actually engaging with it.

Issues related to identity have been subject to extensive research in humanities. The amount of knowledge produced in psychology, sociology, geography and history is vast and possibly overwhelming. In the context of this thesis, we will refer to this large corpus but by no way will we intend to present a comprehensive sum of the state of the research on the topic. Instead, we will rely on some of the theories developed by social scientists only as a back up to the artistic project, with the aim of underling the constructive nature of identities. To investigate identities through art is not as a peculiar enterprise as it may first seem. The rise of national identities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely empowered by artists. In Finland the collection of oral tradition and the writing of the Kalevala by Elias Lönnrot was a major milestone in the definition of "Finnishness". Painters of the so-called Finnish golden age were heavily inspired by local folklore, landscapes and mythologies and managed to reveal the beauty of the place and its popular culture, providing means to the national pride. The current project is in line with this tradition in its use of aesthetic means for the appropriation

of nature. However, it formally departs from it as it does not consist of paintings or sculptures (to limit ourselves to visual arts) but of a mix of interventions and performances carried out in the woods. As such, it fits into the environmental art tradition which puts a strong emphasis on the notion of place. To some extent, it could be said that, instead of representing the place, environmental art is the place.

*Looking for Risto* consists of a three weeks journey on my own-made raft on the lakes of Saimaa watershed, looking for my alter ego. During the journey, I produced small installations and performances, all documented in the form of video clips published online, a journal and an exhibition. Although, these different outcomes can be considered independently, they are truly meaningful only in relation to each other and in the greater context of the journey. Among the important aspects of the work of art is the attempt to fully engage with the environment what is, besides the journey, reflected in the well considered use of materials and the generation of the story.

Because most of the project was carried out in remote locations, issues related to documentation had to be carefully considered. The issue has been subject to debate from the early days of land and environmental art. Mostly, it raises the unsettling question of what is in the end the work of art: is it the actual sculpture or performance only a very few saw or is it its representation in the form of a photograph, a film or an essay. Neither answers are entirely satisfactory and raise a series of difficulties. In the more specific context of the current project, I consider that in fact both the original performance and its documentation are part of

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the art work. *Looking for Risto* is not an object of art that can be isolated from its context. It is a process in which both the preparatory phase and the following documentation are significant. Instead of trying to isolate the journey as an (immaterial) art object, I consider better suited to look at it as the climax of the process.

The present Master's thesis is divided in three parts that should address all of the afore-mentioned issues. In the first part, *Where from*, I intend to consider the various sources of inspiration for *Looking for Risto*. I will start with a discussion on the concept of identity and particularly the conditions of identification with the natural environment. By adopting a constructivist approach, I will argue that both concepts of "nature" and of "Finland" are social products. More specifically, I will try to demonstrate how at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Finnish artists played a central role in the shaping of these concepts. Their vision however, was largely idealised and is only loosely reflected in today's reality. Modernity is, alongside nature, another significant feature of Finnishness. Some authors have criticized this shift towards a de-territorialized identity, pointing at its many adverse effects. I will intend to challenge this opinion by showing that identification with the natural environment needs not necessarily to find its origins on the local level but can also be the result of cosmopolitan influences. This discussion will serve as a solid background for my artistic work which aim is to present engagement with nature as the only possible way to reconcile cosmopolitan sources of identification with nature with the local environment. The notion of engagement was best defined by Arnold Berleant and is typical of the practice of many environmental artists. I will

briefly exemplify it through the work of a few Finnish artists before browsing through the several aspects of my own work.

The second part of the thesis, *Here*, is a transcript of the journal I wrote along the journey. It should be understood as an integral part of the artistic project. As it is best suited to be published in a book, I have included it here. The reader who would like to explore other aspects of the project is invited to consult video material available online.

The third part, *Where to*, concentrates on the notion of art as a process. *Looking for Risto* is not an art object. It is a story, an artistic journey. As I will explain, both the preparatory work and subsequent documentation and publications to be parts of it. To consider art making dynamically makes it also possible to reflect on the successes and shortcomings of the project, what should inform the planning of future works. This approach will also offer a solution the unsettling questions of what is the real work of art. I will argue that documentation can legitimately be looked at as a part of the work of art. Lastly, I will explain why I have intended to use various mediums, from video-blogging to installation and writing. Each mode of confrontation has its advantages and downsides which, as an artist, should be taken into account.

WHERE FROM





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## 1. IDENTITY, NATURE AND FINLAND

### **Some theoretical clarifications**

*Looking for Risto* concerns itself with identity and how it relates to the environment. Identity can generally be defined as what distinguishes one person from another, in other words, what makes me me. As we will see in more detail later, it can be argued that the environment is a major dimension of one's identity alongside other factors such as language or sexual attributes.

When dealing with identity, one of the first distinctions to be made is between collective identity and individual one. If individual identity is what makes me me, collective identity is understood as what makes us us, what makes Finns Finnish, or men men. Collective identity is the set of features that distinguish one group from another. Both the individual and collective cases concern themselves with what happens at the individual level and are to be distinguished from the concept of "collective consciousness". The latter concentrates on phenomena occurring at the level of the group rather than at the individual's level. It takes groups of individuals as separate entities with their own psychological characteristics. My work deals both with collective and individual identities.

Second, my approach to the concept of identity is definitely constructivist, as opposed to an essentialist one. To put it shortly, I consider that one is not born as a woman, a Finn or a catholic. One becomes such. "Being precedes essence"<sup>1</sup>. We first come to existence and only after do we construct our essence, our identity. This position has significant consequences in philosophical terms as it leaves individuals ample scope to exert their freedom, and this despite the constraints of circumstances. An essentialist position negates this freedom to the individual: its physical attributes determine its gender, the nationality of the parents its nationality and so on. A constructivist approach to the concept of identity also has significant implications in terms of method. By positing that identity is a construct and is in a constant development, it becomes possible to de-construct it, to reveal the processes at stake in its formation, to single out the social factors individuals are exposed to in their adoption or rejection of various kinships.

Third, among the many facets of one's identity, I am primarily concerned with the question of identity in relation to places. Gender, political alignment or the sense of class are equally interesting issues but they go far beyond the boundaries of the present work. *Looking for Risto* explores the conditions of identification with the place, the territory, the landscape, in short our environment. Here, the environment is understood in a rather broad sense. It can be first defined as what surrounds us physically but we will attach to it a metaphysical dimension in order to fully grasp the implication it has in matters of identities. Places and

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1 Simone De Beauvoir (1976), *Ethics of ambiguity*, New York, USA: Kensington Press

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landscapes have meaning beyond their physical characteristics. This often takes the form of narratives people link with certain places. If Stonehenge is popular, it is not only because of the aesthetically pleasing vertical agency of a bunch of large rocks on a flat landscape but also because of all the myths and historical bearings of the site. In an essay on cultural landscape, Norwegian scholar Sven Artzen makes a similar claim<sup>2</sup>:

“Many cultural landscapes somehow represent or embody people's sense of identity, the sense of who they are and where they belong, at the local, regional or national level, or as members of an ethnic group. Such landscapes have evolved in certain ways over time. They have distinct histories that involve the land and certain groups of people and communities relating to the land in various ways. The landscapes are significant in that they embody distinct narratives and so provide an anchor and context for the lives of people and communities of today”

Fourth, this thesis deals largely with national identities. Among the many collective identities, national identity has been the subject of extensive research. This will make it easier to discuss its connections with nature and the arts. Still, the focus on national identities does not justify itself only through the abundance of theoretical literature. I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis how crucial a marker it is. The reason is to be found in its multidimensional character. It is an information from which a large amount of characteristics can be assumed. When meeting a French person, one can guess that this person speaks

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2 S. Artzen (2008), *Complex cultural landscape*, in Emily Brady (Ed.), *Humans in the land*, Oslo, Norway: Oslo University Press, p.47

French, appreciates food, likes football rather than baseball, prefers wine to sake, has completed high-school, is probably catholic, and so on. These assumptions may not be all true but they are likely to be true and make social interactions easier. Besides, nationality is flexible enough to be built on changing elements. In multilingual states such as Switzerland and Spain, the emphasis is put on other elements than the language. It can be the attachment to a political regime, a religion, a particular life style. Lastly, national identities have historically been crucial factors in the forming of modern societies. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it gradually grew to be so significant up to become one of the main justification for political power. It provided the basis for social cohesion necessary to the development of democracy which builds upon the commitment of individuals as the state's power is not legitimized by custom or divine right but by being the incarnation of the group. In today's Europe, a majority of states are set upon relatively culturally homogeneous territories despite various regionalist movements such as in Belgian Flanders or Spanish Catalonia. To support the claim, a comparison of political maps of Europe of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is revealing. Today's Germany consisted in a myriad of micro-states three centuries ago. Contrarily, Greece, the Balkan states and Bulgaria were part of the Ottoman Empire. Likewise, today's Finland was under the authority of the Swedish crown. In other parts of the world however, cultural heterogeneity of given territories remains a major factor of tension. The current situation in Palestine could be seen to be largely caused by the conflicting claims of monopoly over the land of two distinct cultural groups.

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After these few clarifications, the focus of this thesis should be clearer. In the following paragraphs, we will examine the conditions of identification with nature, both at the individual and collective levels. This shall reveal the crucial role played by the arts in the way people look at their environment.

### **Identity and nature: the case of Finland**

It is common place that Finns have strong bonds with the natural environment. Anyone who has travelled in Finland and abroad has noticed how Finnish cities are relatively penetrated by natural elements such as forest, lakes or sea shore. Compared to many cities of central Europe, population density is low, notwithstanding the exception of Helsinki, Finnish cities remain small. Besides urban planning, the significance of the natural environment is patent in the dominant Finnish way of life. Outdoors activities are popular. People ski and walk, go fishing and berry picking, like boating and retreating to forest cabins. While it can be assumed that the population of Finland have picked mushrooms and berries as long as forests have provided them, these practices are not necessarily ancestral. At least the way they are carried out and their function have changed over time. Coming back to berry and mushroom picking, it is obviously not any more a necessary activity for subsistence. It has become a leisure activity which purpose is to be pleasant. In the same fashion, people do not ski any more because it is the most convenient mode of transportation in winter forests but because of the pleasure of being physically active and gliding in a calm and natural environment. Leaving aside motivations such as sportive challenges, the popularity of outdoor activities reveal a taste for nature among Finns. This intuition has been confirmed by ethnological research<sup>3</sup>. In a study conducted in the Turku region students, high-school pupils

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3 [http://www.edu.parnet.fi/lukio/pdf/identiteetti\\_tiny.pdf](http://www.edu.parnet.fi/lukio/pdf/identiteetti_tiny.pdf), retrieved June 2012

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and professors were asked to answer questions dealing with the meaning of Finnishness. When asked which are the main national symbols, respondents mentioned most often the Finnish flag, the Finnish Lion and "nature". When dealing with identity, it is noticeable that nature came among the answers of what symbolizes best Finnishness. It was not an obvious answer a priori. In a comparative study of national landscapes in Japan and the United states, Yuriko Saito<sup>4</sup> underlines that the term "landscape" is generally understood as referring to scenic natural landscapes, at least in the two countries of her study. She goes on demonstrating how some specific scenic natural landscapes have played a significant role in the forming of national identity in the USA and in Japan. We could assume that as well as in Finland, nature would rank high among national symbols. Although I haven't come across data comparable to the one of the Finnish study for these countries, I doubt it. Mount Fuji or the Grand Canyon may be cited as national symbols, probably not "nature", which is a broader concept than a specific scenic landscape. The preeminence of nature in Finnish identity could be most obviously explained by the pervasiveness of natural elements in the environment. As seen from the air, Finland seems to be a sparsely populated country in which human mark is almost unnoticeable. The landscape is dominated by an endless maze of lakes and forests. This impression is confirmed by statistics according to which only about 3% of the land area in Finland is built up. With 16 inhabitants per square kilometre, Finland is also

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<sup>4</sup> Yuriko Saito (2008), *Cultural Construction of national landscapes and its consequences*, in Emily Brady (Ed.), *Humans in the land*, Oslo, Norway: Oslo University Press

one of the most sparsely populated country in Europe. In more rural regions<sup>5</sup>, that is the largest part of the country, the rate goes well below 10 inhabitants per square kilometre. According to Eeva Berglund<sup>6</sup>, in such a sparsely populated territory, "the possibility of forgetting about geography [...] is not available as it appears to be in centres of power." Unlike the cases of the United States and Japan, nature is not an abstraction, a famous vista known by all. It is a reality people live in on an everyday basis. To live in Kainuu, the region that Berglund chose for her research, means to make do with natural elements. In December, there is barely any daylight and no extensive network of city lamp posts to make up for it. In the event of a snow storm, it will take days to clean the roads up as dwellings are spread over large areas. On the opposite, in "centres of power" it is possible to live almost completely disconnected from natural elements thanks to the heavy infrastructures making the city.

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5 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Population\\_map\\_of\\_Finland.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Population_map_of_Finland.svg), retrieved June 2012

6 Eva Berglund (2003), *Finland as information society: an anthropological critique*, Suomen Antropologi, vol. 4, no. 28, pp. 216.



### **What is “nature”?**

Since Finns show such an attachment to “nature”, we can wonder what it really is, in general and in Finland in particular. Generally, nature is understood as opposed to culture. Physically, a place in its natural state would be one not bearing any visible trace of human activity. As we will see in this section, such an idea of pristine nature however, is more a myth than reality. From a strong constructivist position, one would claim that in fact, pristine nature does not exist, as for it to exist one has to reflect on it. From the moment there are eyes to see it, there is a human in the land thus wasting the pristine character of it. Such an opinion is too radical, as if constructivism was negating itself with the claim that everything is essentially constructed. If a thing does not have a name, it does not mean it does not have a physical reality.<sup>7</sup> What may be true however is that “nature” as a concept is a social construct. What is invented is not nature as such but its cultural meaning. This is to claim that environments, beyond their physical characteristics carry a cultural layer through which humans make sense of it. We will examine this in greater detail in the following sections. For now let us concentrate on “nature” as a physical reality.

To consider that a natural environment is one that is non-human, one that does not bear any trace of the human hand is problematic is so that in our times, most environments

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<sup>7</sup> John O'Neill (2008), *Wilderness, cultivation and appropriation*, in Emily Brady (Ed.), *Humans in the land*, Oslo, Norway: Oslo University Press

are subject to economical exploitation, leaving clearly visible traces of human activity and disrupting biological cycles. With the exponential emissions of greenhouse gases and other atmospheric pollutants, even the most remote places are put under pressure and are gradually and probably irreversibly changing. In the summer of 2012, 97% of the surface of the Greenland ice sheet turned to slush<sup>8</sup>, an unprecedented level. Scientists estimate that it would still take several centuries for the entire mass of ice to melt. Still, such a figure is striking and gives a clear idea of the global impact of human activity on natural environments.

Should we then consider that there is no environment in its natural state left on this planet? I think that the answer is negative. It would be more appropriate to state that there is not such a thing as “pristine nature”. Humans have always lived in the land and although the impact of human activity on ecosystems is unprecedented in range and in depth, to consider that there was once such a thing as “pristine nature” now disappeared is a form of ethnocentrism. When Europeans came to North America, they saw nothing but empty wilderness offered as God's gift for them to “grow and multiply”. Compared to Europe, America looked like untouched nature and justified the appropriation of the land at the expense of indigenous populations. Locke thus wrote that “God gave the World to Men in Common, but [...] it cannot be supposed He meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational”.<sup>9</sup> To appeal to the idea of

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<sup>8</sup> Nasa, <http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/greenland-melt.html>, retrieved August 2012

<sup>9</sup> John Locke, *Two treatises of government II*, Peter Laslett (Ed.) (1988), Cambridge: Cambridge University press

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pristine nature, to take indigenous populations out of the picture, or rather to consider them as a part of nature (as opposed to European civilisation detached from it) is to ignore that for millennia most of the land of this planet has been inhabited. One's eye may not be trained to notice the marks left in the environment by culturally different populations but this in no way means the land is empty. Even extreme environments such as the Arctic ice floes or the Sahara have been exploited by human populations for centuries.

At the Finnish level, the idea of untouched nature is as a myth as it is elsewhere. In fact both the statistics and the bird's eye view mentioned earlier are misleading. In reality, the Finnish environment is almost entirely a production landscape. The vast majority of forest areas are industrially exploited. In order to increase wood production, forest lands are drained by a dense network of ditches. Finland also holds the odd title of the country with the densest road network in the world<sup>10</sup> in order to allow trucks to collect timber from every corner of the country. Radical reshaping of the land is not a recent phenomenon. In 1818, a canal dug between river Vuoksi and lake Ladoga unexpectedly eroded, turned into a river and became the main waterway to Ladoga by decreasing water levels of the original branch by four meters.<sup>11</sup> Besides these spectacular operations, human activity is also noticeable in the look of the forest in general. For decades cattle was left grazing in forests for the summer time. Forests turned into meadows and although trees may grow again today in these areas, the land

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10 Ritva Kovalainen & Sanni Seppo (2006), *Tree People*, Finland: Hiilinielu tuotanto and Miellotar

11 Jari Nenonen & Anne Portaankorva (2009), *The geology of the lakeland Finland area*, Northern Environmental Education Program, p.24

keeps memory of its former exploitation. To some extent, it can be argued that even conservation areas are complete products of human activities. Conservation programs often aim at bringing the environment as close as it can to its pristine state. This raises difficulties as the definition of this “pristine state” is but an arbitrary judgement. Besides, I have written elsewhere<sup>12</sup> that National parks are natural areas “where human management is most pregnant. National parks are covered with nets of hiking trails. Space is carefully divided in areas where different sets of regulations apply. Shores are equipped with piers and buoys.” In short, behind the image of Finland as a wild territory appears a completely managed environment in which landscapes are shaped for the necessities of industry and tourism. This is not a recent phenomenon. In 1915, I. K. Inha already wrote that “huge areas of once virgin forest have been robbed and raped from one end to the other. And thus these days I can rarely bring back with me from the forest that blissful feeling of Nature that once struck such full chords in our breasts during wilderness excursions”.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Inha appeals to the myth of “pristine nature” is noticeable and characteristic of the idealization of the natural environment by Finnish artists of his time. It remains that Finnish environment was then already largely exploited for the needs of industry or agriculture.

We have seen that the idea of “pristine nature” is ambiguous and ineffective. This holds true in Finland as elsewhere and is confirmed by a simple look at the land as it is:

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12 Tristan Hamel (2010), *54Days*, <http://54paivat.blogspot.fi>, retrieved August 2012

13 I. K. Inha (1957), *Pohjolan Maisemia vuosiadan vaihteessa*, Porvoo, Finland: WSOY

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inhabited, managed and reshaped. Still, nature as I understand it is not necessarily pristine and one needs not reject the concept as whole. A natural environment is most often a cultural landscape where natural elements dominate although they may mingle with ones of human origin. Instead of opposing natural environments to cultural ones, it is better to consider them as more or less natural on a continuum which both extreme points would be pure abstractions as there is neither purely natural environment, or pristine, nor purely artefactual one. This approach comes close to the one proposed by Emily Brady, namely the concept of dialectical relationship between humans and nature<sup>14</sup>. The idea was first developed by David Crawford<sup>15</sup> but Brady brings significant amendments to his definition. First Crawford has developed the concept in the sole case of interactions between art and nature whereas Brady applies it to a much broader set of cases, virtually any environment if we consider that there is nowadays no place which would not be subject to human pressure. More importantly, Crawford distinguishes between cases in which humans and nature interact harmoniously and cases in which the interaction is dialectical. The example brought forward by Crawford is the one of French and English gardens. In the first case, he considers the interaction to be dialectical as the garden is designed after an artefactual model. In contrast, the second case is an harmonious relationship because nature is taken as the model of the design. For Brady such a

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14 Emily Brady(2008), *Relating humans and nature through agricultural landscapes*, in Emily Brady (Ed.), *Humans in the land*, Oslo, Norway: Oslo University Press

15 D. Crawford (1983), *Nature and Art: Some dialectical relationships*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art criticism, 42

distinction is misleading as the interaction is always complex and cannot be set as clearly harmonious or conflicting. To sum up she proposes the following definition:

Dialectical relationships are best described as more or less harmonious, more or less conflicting in virtue of the type of interaction that takes place. Harmony or conflict ought to be apparent in the emergent object, which represents a synthesis of artifice and nature. Sometimes the relationship is very conflicting, as when nature resists human modification or indeed, when human intentionality is very strongly imposed onto nature.<sup>16</sup>

My understanding of “nature” is in line with Brady's dialectical approach. A natural environment is one where natural elements dominate without necessarily taking humans and their artefacts out of the picture. I also think that when quoting “nature” as a national symbol, respondents to the study on Finnishness had in mind an inhabited landscape, not a completely virgin forest. To support my point, consider the following anecdote. I was recently at a friend's cottage to celebrate Midsummer. At some point, I found myself with a Finnish acquaintance looking at the lake on the shore of which the cottage was built. The sun was setting and the sky exhibited a beautiful palette spanning from turquoise to orange and red. On the foreground, the branches of a couple of birches nicely framed the picture. The lake's waters were totally still and we could see water striders gliding over the surface. After a couple of minute, my acquaintance suddenly said, without me asking any question, “You

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<sup>16</sup> Brady, op.cit., p.126

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know, for me this is Finland”. I believe this corresponds to the picture many have in mind when thinking of nature in relation to Finnishness: not a wild forest but a lake view from a cottage's pier.

### **“Inventing nature”**

I briefly mentioned that an environment does not only consist of its physical features but also includes a cultural layer giving it meaning. This is precisely what is at stake when evoking “nature” in relation with identity. A landscape, an environment is significant only through the meaning it bears, for an individual or for a nation. A central hypothesis of the present thesis is that artists play a central role in the cultural construction of the environment, and more specifically that artists in Finland forged the idea of “nature” that still holds today, at least in popular culture.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Finland as elsewhere artists were at the forefront of the forging of national identity, manipulating symbols to form what would become the archetype of Finnishness. Still, one could ask whether it is art which shaped national identities or rather art which was shaped by a *Zeitgeist*. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. Artists are not creating in a vacuum and are influenced by a wide range of phenomena, experiences and events. However, in the case of some specific Finnish artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the deliberate attempt to reinforce national pride is clear. Their insistence on depicting or referring to the natural environment led some to even claim that artists “invented nature”<sup>17</sup>, an opinion that Oscar Wilde would not repudiate:

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17 Art Haapala (2002) *Art and Nature: The Interplay of Works of Art and Natural Phenomena*, in Arnold Berleant (Ed) *Environment & the arts* Berleant, Burlington, USA: Ashgate publishing



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”Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.”<sup>18</sup>

This quote is typical of the provocative prose of the English author. He nevertheless grasps the revealing power of art. Arto Haapala<sup>19</sup> refers to it as art “making reality”. In his view art, and particularly fiction, can enter our reality in spite of being the object of imagination. First, art has the power to trigger emotional responses from us. A moving story, a scary film will make us cry or shiver even though we know it is only an imaginary work. Second, Haapala notes that “we acquire concepts and conceptual schemes from fictional works and apply them to our everyday surroundings”<sup>20</sup>. This is in fact common place: an encounter with an art piece can change the way we apprehend and understand our reality. The reading of George Orwell's “1984” cannot fail to change someone's feeling towards the current development of the surveillance society. More generally, childhood tales and stories and their visual representations play a significant role in the shaping of individual identities,

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18 Oscar Wilde (1891), *The Decay of Lying*, in Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, retrieved August 2012

19 Haapala, op. Cit.

20 Ibid.

not the least in the development of gender identity. While young boys are more inclined to play cowboys and soldiers inspired by the books or cartoons they have seen, young girls rather tend to make up princess stories. Haapala also notes that some works have gained such a wide audience and significance over the centuries that they have come to deeply shape our world. From an atheist point of view, the Bible would be a perfect example.

It could be argued that London's fog is mysterious notwithstanding what artist have written or painted about it. Finnish summer sunsets are equally beautiful, independent of their depiction by writers and painters. It may well be true and indeed it is up to anyone to experience beauty while looking at an evening landscape in summer Finland. What art changes is that it brings forward a certain way to look at things, a certain way to experience our world. From beautiful, a sunset becomes romantic. And this vision is not the only product of individual reflection. It is shared by a large part of the community. Another counter-argument would be that not everybody has encountered these artworks significant to their cultural identity. Isn't it possible, in the end, to appreciate the romantic character of a sunset without having read Sillanpää's novels? Of course it is! It remains that Sillanpää's lines are so significant to Finnish identity that they have deeply penetrated it. One may not have read a particular novel, he nonetheless lives in a society in which common images and symbols borrowed from some specific art works are pervasive.

The interplay of works of art and our environment in the way we look at the former indicates that the objects constituting our physical world do not have only physical attributes

but also metaphysical ones. As we look at objects or landscapes, we do not see a mere collection of physical attributes. We assign them various qualities only partially connected to their physical appearance. A landscape can be sublime or dull, an object joyous or serene. These qualities reveal that the human world is complex, multi-layered and meaningful. To grasp this interplay, Haapala refers to the concept of "life worlds" and define them as:

structures that gives us entities and events as *certain kinds* of entities and events. Life worlds are culturally determined totalities that define entities as meaningful and as valuable, or possibly as something to be avoided or despised. [...] This is true of the role that nature plays in our life world, too. Nature appears differently in different cultural contexts. When we have lived in these structures long enough, or if we are born into them, the meanings and values of different things within them become part of our identities and so self-evident that we have to make effort to realize and understand their presence and their nature.<sup>21</sup>

Arts are significant in identity building in the way they give meaning to our physical world. When my friend saw "Finland" in the typical lake sunset, it is because she has grown up with this idea. She may have encountered the association in books, films, advertisement and so on. The sunset is not Finnish by nature but was attributed such quality.

Other scholars refer to the meaning borne by our environment in slightly different terms than Haapala's ones. Sven Artzen considers that "landscapes are significant in that they

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21 Ibid.

embody distinct narratives”<sup>22</sup>. These narratives are of many kinds. They could be purely individual ones. Depending on our respective experiences, we look at places in different ways. In another essay, I wrote about the subjects of the photographs I shoot when on the lakes. I usually don't take pictures of famous vistas because they do not touch me. Instead I take pictures of insignificant details or anonymous landscapes where something special happened, for instance that ”as I approached the island, an osprey started to fly in circles above my head and scream, making me well aware it was his territory.”<sup>23</sup> For me, the image of this specific island will forever carry this story. Another person would see it completely differently because she was not there on this particular evening when the osprey screamed in the otherwise silent landscape. In other cases, these narratives can be collective ones. One good example would be the meaning borne by religious sites. In Lapland, some fells have a particular signification for Samís. They are not merely fells. They are ”magical landscapes” and their cultural attributes overrides their physical features. It is interesting to note that these sites are not necessarily modified by humans. A given environment can be culturally significant in spite of the apparent domination of natural elements.

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22 Artzen, op.cit.

23 Hamel, op.cit.

### **“Inventing Finland”**

I have proposed earlier in this essay that the strong identification with nature in Finland finds its origins in the conscious efforts of Finnish artists to strengthen national sentiment during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The growing enthusiasm for nationalism was a phenomenon taking the whole of Europe over and even beyond, for instance in America and Japan. At the time, Finland was a Grand Duchy under the authority of the Russian Tsar. Political pressure gradually grew with Russia pushing Finland towards greater integration within the empire until it culminated during the period of so-called “russification” at the end of the century. This led artists to intensify their efforts to clearly distinguish Finland from Russia. Edvard Isto's painting “The attack” (1899) is a very straightforward reference to the political situation of the time, as it depicts a two-headed eagle trying to wrench a law book from the hands of the maiden Finland. In another famous painting, “Wilderness” (1899) by Pekka Halonen, Finland is symbolized by a pine forest which blackened trunks “convey the message that not even a wounded nation would surrender”<sup>24</sup>. The subject matter, the intent of the artist and the title of the afore mentioned work are striking when investigating links between nature, national identity and the arts. The peculiarity was perfectly grasped by Markku Valkonen in several of his writings. In the preface to his *Golden Age*<sup>25</sup> he writes that:

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24 Markku Valkonen (1992), *Finnish Art over the centuries*, Helsinki, Finland: Otava Publishing

25 Markku Valkonen (1992), *The Golden Age – Finnish art 1850 – 1907*, Porvoo, Finland: WSOY

“Even in this day and age Finns characterise themselves by a closeness to nature, and see it as a continuing source of inspiration and national identity. But these images of nature, of forests without end, myriad lakes and abruptly changing seasons, owe more to the imagines of artists and poets, and even the odd philosopher, than the realities of



Illustration 1:  
"Wilderness", 1899,  
Pekka Halonen



Illustration 2: "The attack",  
1899, Edvard Isto

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the physical environment. Armed with notebooks and sketching blocks, they climbed the windswept fells only to discover the face of woman eternal in the landscape, penetrated the sombre depths of northern forests only to find the serene pastures of time immemorial, or scaled the craggy heights of Karelia only to relive the Nietzschean dream of superman in his spiritual loneliness.”

The focus on the natural environment certainly owes a lot to poets. Runeberg's "Our Land" became the Finnish national anthem. Its words celebrate rivers and forests, summer light and winter nights. It does not focus on people, past or present, and their heroic achievement. In a striking comparison, the French national anthem is a call to patriots to march East and defend the nation against invaders. The focus on nature is as noticeable in visual arts. It was calculated that over the two first decades of the existence of the Finnish Art Society, 60% of paintings shown in exhibitions organized by the former represented landscapes<sup>26</sup>. At the time though, these landscapes scenes were more of the picturesque type rather than mythical primeval forests. "Cottage in Kuru" (1860) and Kyrö falls (1854) by Werner Holmberg are good examples of such paintings. Although natural elements dominate the scene, it is a tamed and inhabited land that is painted. Holmberg also painted "A road in Häme" (1860) which remains one of the most famous Finnish landscape paintings up to nowadays. I once took part in a lecture on "Finnish nature" in which the professor used it as an illustration to present the main tree species growing in Finland. More than photographs or

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26 Ibid.

scientific drawings, Holmberg's painting achieved a perfect synthesis of natural elements to express the idea of "Finnish nature".



Illustration 4: "A road in Häme", 1860, Werner Holmberg



Illustration 3: "The fighting capercaillies", 1886, Ferdinand Von Wright

Later in the century, nature became a subject by itself. "The fighting capercaillies" (1886) by Ferdinand Von Wright and Pekka Halonen's various winter landscapes are noticeable examples of this trend.

Beyond straight depiction of nature, another lasting trend among Finnish artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been to depict mythological scenes from the Kalevala. Nowadays, Gallen-Kallela's works gained such a fame that they became the archetypical model of what the legendary world of the Kalevala "really" looked like. However, Gallen was preceded by several artist who took the Kalevala as subject matter for their work. To cite but a few:



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“Väinämöinen Stringing his Kantele” (1851) by Johan Z. Blackstadius, “Lemminkäinen's Mother” (1862) by Robert Wilhelm Ekman and “Aino” (1876) by Johannes Takanen . The increasing focus on the Kalevalian theme during the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not a move away from nature. On the contrary, there is a correspondence between these legends from times immemorial and nature as artists used to idealise it. Artists such as Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt had a strong interest for Finnish natural environment and in particular for nature landscapes of Carelia which was thought to be Finland's true face. In 1890, an article in the Young Finns' paper *Päivälehti* called for artists to direct their attention eastwards:

“What a great success awaits those works of art originating from the land where the Kalevala was sung and where the folk have managed to preserve the true Karelian 'character' that elsewhere has been lost or sullied; we would perhaps, better understand the nuances of old poetry once the keen eye of the artist has revealed to us the place where the run singers lived and from where they undoubtedly derived their greatest inspiration”<sup>27</sup>

The link drawn between the Kalevala and Carelia is a good example of the notions of “life worlds” and “magical landscapes” discussed earlier in this essay. In the eye of artists, the environment is not only a physical landscape, it is also a metaphysical one and bears within itself the very origins of the nation. The synthesis of the physical and metaphysical was best achieved by Gallén-Kallela whose art was deeply rooted in Finnish landscape, thus acquiring

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27 Ibid.



Illustration 6:  
"Lemminkäinen's Mother",  
1862, Robert W. Ekman



Illustration 5: "Keitele", 1905, Akseli  
Gallén-Kallela

an iconic status in Finland. At his funeral in 1931, Yrjö Hirn, professor of aesthetics in Helsinki, declared in an eulogy that "Finnish nature, Finnish antiquity, Finnish popular life have stepped forward as if illuminated. His great life's work has raised an entire nation to appreciate values that it did not know it possessed as treasures before this."<sup>28</sup>

It should be acknowledged that Finland is not the only country in which national identity built upon reflecting on the natural environment. In the United States, artists also

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén (2005), *The Sacred Spring's of National Art*, Belvedere, vol 11, no.1, pp.133-141.

took the land as a major source of inspiration in order to reinforce national sentiment. In Canada, the “Group of Seven” consisting of landscape painters believed that a distinct Canadian art could be developed by a close contact with nature. What artistic movements share in common in Finland, Canada and the United States is the search for a depiction of their country distinct from picturesque scenes of central Europe's countryside. The aim was to find grounds for national pride and this could not be done on the same terms as in central Europe, as these countries landscapes had not been shaped by two millennia of agriculture.



Illustration 7: Aino Triptych, 1891, Akseli Gallen-Kallela

## 2. COSMOPOLITANISM: FROM CONFLICTS TO RECONCILIATION

At this point, the strong identification of Finns with nature has been evidenced. The arts, and particularly visual arts, have played a central role in reinforcing the bonds of a nation with its natural environment. However, the significance of nature in today's shaping of one's identity can be challenged. Some argue that the environment is not as significant a factor as it has been in the past due to rapid cultural globalization. Some other factors are at stake. In the case of Finland, modernity is another important feature of collective identity. Manuel Castells has identified this phenomena as “space of flows”<sup>29</sup>, a world in which the geographical dimension is not anymore conclusive. On a collective level, this movement can be regretted because of a variety of adverse effects, mostly related to the preeminence of economical logics over environmental and social ones. But, reflecting on my own background and experience, I consider that on the individual level, the notion of space of flows shall not be entirely considered as negative. Adverse effects are only one part of the picture and more positive ideas in regard with the environment are also carried over national borders. I grew up in a multicultural environment and was exposed to works of arts, especially fictional works such as novels and films, from other origins than my home-country. I believe that despite the fact that I always lived in large cosmopolitan cities, the appreciation

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29 Castells, M. (1996), *The Rise of the Network Society*, Malden, MA, Blackwell

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for nature I developed over the year partly originates from these experiences. The myth of return to nature is not the monopoly of a single nation. Books such as Thoreau's *Walden* and London's novels are part of a global cultural heritage and their influence went far beyond the United States.

### **Conflicting factors of Finnish identity**

Despite the pervasiveness of nature in the Finnish environment and the efforts of artists to single it out as a major part of Finnish identity the view according to which it is a determinant factor in the construction of the national identity can be challenged. Finland is a country of innumerable lakes and forests, but it is also, among other things, the country of modernity. This ambiguous term may include elements such as an advanced information society, a top ranking schooling system, a stable and performing political system. Some authors, and in the first place Manuel Castells<sup>30</sup>, claim that these are currently the significant factors of identity construction. In his view, the notion of territory is obsolete as “the materialization of social relations is best conceptualized as a flow that escapes the control of specific societies”<sup>31</sup>. The particular significance of modernity for Finnish identity may find its origins in the truly giant leap the country took in only a relatively short time. A bit more than a century ago Finland seemed to have been left aside by the industrial revolution that had

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

taken over the rest of Europe. It largely remained a rural country with only modest industrial centres. In the same way, Finland was one of the European countries with the lowest literacy rate. A bit more than a hundred years later, Finland is considered to have the best educational system in the world and to be one of the most competitive economies, especially in the field of communication technologies. And nowadays “to be Finnish is, among other things, to be modern.”<sup>32</sup> This holds true both for the way Finns look at themselves and the way they are looked at from the outside. Although the way such modernity is celebrated locally in news headlines is sometimes slightly puerile, Finland is objectively over performing in rankings looking at modernity from various angles. To take but a few examples, Finland is the fifth most advanced information society<sup>33</sup>, the fourth most competitive economy<sup>34</sup> and Helsinki the most liveable city in the world<sup>35</sup>. The fact that Finland is doing well in these rankings and that its inhabitants subsequently see themselves as modern supports the claim of Manuel Castells. Notions of competitiveness, information society or liveability are not connected to any environment in particular, any specific place. They are global, as is modernity, and identity building may well be disconnected from the notion of territory.

Does this mean that Finnish identity is losing its connection with the local environment? Are “modernity” and “nature” conflicting concepts or can they coexist? On one

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32 Berglund, op.cit.

33 [http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press\\_releases/2011/31.aspx](http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2011/31.aspx), retrieved August 2012

34 World economic forum, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GCR\\_CompetitivenessIndexRanking\\_2011-12.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GCR_CompetitivenessIndexRanking_2011-12.pdf), retrieved August 2012

35 Monocle Magazine, <http://www.monocle.com/QoL-2011/>, retrieved August 2012

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hand, there seem not to be a radical conflict between the two. One can live in the backwoods of Kainuu, literally surrounded by nature and yet be hyper-connected and exhibit all the features of modernity. I remember one lecture I attended during the first year I spent in Finland whose title was “Finnish way of life”. The lecturer, in his concluding remarks, showed a poster which, according to him, summarized the entire topic. The said poster was a photograph of a still lake with forest on the background. On the foreground, a Nokia mobile phone laid upon a pier protruding over the lake. To a large extent, and after having lived in Finland for years, I think our lecturer was quite right. The picture was really a good summary of Finnish way of life, and by extension of Finnish identity, suggesting that both attachment to nature and modernity harmoniously coexist.

On the other hand, some argue that modernity is not a neutral concept. As Berglund puts it, “Finland is, after all, routinely represented as a bold, new information society, where anything is possible if everyone does their bit and if the (virtual) capital is available. Looked at from a different angle, in Finland as elsewhere, flesh and blood seems to be losing out to robotics, environmental sustainability to economic competitiveness”.<sup>36</sup> The gradual demands for increasing productivity has led to an intense and systematic exploitation of the natural environment and particularly of forests. This makes Finland the country with densest road network in the world and with the third highest consumption of electricity per inhabitant<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Berglund, op.cit.

<sup>37</sup> <http://knowthankyou.wordpress.com/2011/04/13/top-ten-consumers-of-electricity/>, retrieved August 2012

These two titles rarely appear in the general media alongside those of competitiveness or liveability. Positive sides of modernity are underlined but the light is rarely cast on induced costs in terms of environmental and social sustainability. This approach is also found in the unconditional governmental support to the countries' competitiveness or connectivity. Modernity has penetrated collective identity to such a point that the need to maintain the countries' position is not a cleaving issue at any time. This lack of debate is a concern. Competitiveness embeds financial pressure on public services and salaries. It justifies projects with radical and durable environmental impact such as power plants and mines. These trends are not specific to Finland. With very rare exceptions, priority given to competitiveness over the environmental and the social is widespread. Conservation efforts and more generally any interest conflicting with the imperative of economic competitiveness is most often disregarded if not subject of laughs, as testifies the following quote from Sauli Niinistö in 1997:

“Is every last tree to be left standing so that all our forests degenerate into impenetrable thickets called primeval forests, as they are so nicely referred to? And all of this only so that every furniture beetle and cockroach gets to lead a rich and happy life?<sup>38</sup>

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38 Minister Sauli Niinistö at a meeting of the party council of the National Coalition Part in May 1997



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Hence it clearly appears that conflicting factors are at stake in the construction of identities, and in the construction of Finnish identity in particular. Despite the commonly admitted picture, modernity and nature are often diverging interests. To determine which one dominates in terms of identity remains a complex issue. It may vary greatly from one individual to another as identity is dynamic and in a constant state of redefinition. From a normative point of view however, it is quite clear that the unchallenged emphasis put on modernity is to be regretted. The need to remain competitive brings pressure on ecosystems either directly through industrial exploitation or indirectly through pollution generated by human activity. It is disrupting natural cycles to a point that cannot be sustained in the long term. As Berglund puts it, "even in as wealthy a part of the world as Finland, unreflexively celebrating mobility and flux is as problematic as denying the body. The costs of a capitalism disconnected from the requirements of regeneration, nurture and concern for livelihood, are borne somewhere, some time."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Berglund, *op.cit.*

### **The cosmopolitan**

Berglund's critics against spaces of flow are normatively well grounded. Despite these, reality for millions of people of today's world looks more alike that of Castells than that of Berglund. For millions, nature is more a concept than an actual experience. If “nature” possibly remains significant in the definition of collective identity, does it hold true at the individual level? Here, I would like to give a short account of my own background. It may not be generalized although I believe many people share large parts of my experience as a relatively rootless cosmopolitan.

My parents both come from Normandy in Northern France although my grandparents are from diverse origins, having moved to find employment in the growing industrial centres of the Seine valley. Unlike some other people, I do not feel strong family bonds as my relatives have always been spread around the country. Similarly, the attachment to a specific place and to the land in general was never stressed. As blue collar workers, my grandparents were mostly driven by the need to find a job, wherever this would be.

I was born in Normandy but shortly after, my parents and I moved to the United States. There I attended a French speaking primary school where pupils came from all over the world. We were from all races and nationalities and at that young age, this appeared to me to be a completely normal situation. At that time, I already appreciated adventure's stories, in children literature, in films and in cartoons. As many young boys, my bike often turned into

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being a proud stallion and myself a fearless pioneer. As my parents appreciated nature, we spent some weekends and holidays in natural areas of the East coast of America. These were the places where I probably faced nature the most in my young years. However, these occasions were seldom and my childhood was for the most spent in urban environment. Unlike some other kids, nature for me was not something concrete. It was not the forest I would play around month after month. It was something far away from home which needed the family to take several days off to be reached. It was the place where the stories of being an Indian or Davy Crockett finally found a suitable environment to be impersonated. That was what nature was for me: more often an imaginary world and seldom a physical reality.

As my parents moved to Southern France, I yet encountered another type of environment. The mountains of Southern France are quite different from the Appalaches or from Canadian taiga. There are no caribous and no raccoons, no lakes on which to find deserted islets ready to be named in a solemn ceremony and no beaver dams. Yet it did not make such a difference for me. It remained the place where to live tremendous adventures. When going hiking, just in case I would find an unexplored cave, I always took a torch lamp along. I dreamt of discovering ancient petroglyphs as I had read some kids did decades before in Lascaux, only a couple of hundreds of kilometres from home. Instead of murals, caves more often sheltered craps of all sorts. The thrill was there in any case. In mountains I would carry a fishing rod, in the event of a torrent filled with salmons. Salmons have for the most disappeared from Pyrenees. Instead, we caught minnows. The thrill was there in any case.

As I grew older and kept a taste for the outdoors, I started to envision adventure trips in Canada or, even better, Alaska. It seemed to be complicated to organize, notwithstanding the fear it inspired to my parents. Instead, I found myself in Finnish Lapland, because on my atlas it looked like the emptiest region of Europe. Besides, I had crossed it with my parents a few years earlier and I remembered to have particularly liked the look of the forest. I took a train to the furthest station, in Kemijärvi, from there a bus to the last stop East, in Salla and walked straight into the forest. I did not search for famous vistas and beautiful landscapes. I only wanted to live in the forest, self-reliant. Years later, I am still in Finland and I still enjoy spending time in the woods. It even happens regularly that I play the adventurer as I used to when younger. I came to truly cherish the Finnish forest and I know it better than any other natural environment. To a large extent, it became a part of my personality as I have dozen of stories to tell about it.

What is noticeable is that the identification with the environment in Finland is everything but foreseeable. I have no family bonds whatsoever in Northern Europe. I knew close to nothing about the country and its natural environment before I visited it for the first time. Rather, it is largely due to an identification at a young age with adventure stories. Although many of these stories are set in America, their range is universal. Instead of the love of a specific country, what many of them teach is the happiness that's brought when wandering in the woods, far from a morally corrupted civilization. And more than anything else, what is at stake is the myth of going back to the wild.

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## **The call of the wild**

“But especially he loved to run in the dim twilight of the summer midnights, listening to the subdued and sleepy murmurs of the forest, reading signs and sounds as man may read a book, and seeking for the mysterious something that called—called, waking or sleeping, at all times, for him to come.”<sup>40</sup>

In the previous paragraphs, I have explained how one's taste for nature can burst from fiction when direct confrontation with natural environments remains rare. Eeva Berglund argues that a conception of identity based on spaces of flow is incompatible with a sense of care for the natural environment. Although her arguments are generally sound, I partially disagree with her, drawing from my own experience. The cases of collective and individual identities differ here. If the emphasis on modernity is to be regretted on the level of collective identity, it does not mean that necessarily, at the individual level, cosmopolitan sources of identities are to be regretted.

As I explained, nature for me has for long been a mythical place where to retreat, live fully away from the constraints of civilization. Some authors such as Jack London deeply marked me from an early age. London's novels and short stories are mostly set in Alaska and northern provinces of Canada. One could argue that in the end, I just identified myself with

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40 Jack London (2004), *The call of the wild & White Fang*, Ware, UK: Wordsworth Classics, p. 58

typically American myths, that by doing so, I adopted parts of the American collective identity. It remains however that I was exposed to it in an otherwise multicultural environment in which nationalities and their symbols were not particularly pregnant. Unlike Berglund, I think that Castell's space of flows should not be circumscribed to the cliché of an irresistible force imposing the rule of a “capitalism disconnected from the requirements of regeneration”. They also convey more positive values. Novels such as “White Fang” and “The Call for the Wild” are not only American. They are part of the world cultural heritage. Children, regardless of their nationality, read them and watch their film or cartoon adaptations all over the world and are probably equally touched by the fate of their characters and by the sharp opposition the author draws between the civilized world and nature. In London's novels, while the world of men is cruel, immoral and ugly, nature is amoral, beautiful and enabling one to live fully. Although the main characters are animals, they are treated as human ones. They are given emotions and ability to make choices, which reinforces the potential for identification. Interesting then to note that the core of both novels is the inner fight at stake in White Fang's and Buck's mind between their dual identities of tamed submissive animals on one hand and of wild, fearless and free animals on the other. Besides the myth of wilderness of London's novels, another dominant theme of adventure books is the one of initiatory journey. In this line, two books particularly stand out, once more from Anglo-Saxon literature: “Treasure Island” by Robert Louis Stevenson and “The adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain. Both novels share with London's writings a critical

**The call of the wild**

The call of the Wild is a novel by Jack London published in 1903. The story takes place in Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush. The book starts as Buck, a St. Bernard-Scotch Collie dog from California is sold as a sled dog. The novel follows him as he struggles to adapt to the harsh conditions of the North and to survive the cruel treatment he suffers from his successive masters until he is rescued by gold digger Thornton. As time passes Buck saves Thornton's life, proves to be very devoted to him and the two develop a strong friendship. As Thornton and his associate continue their search for gold, Buck explores the wilderness in which he feels more and more comfortable. This leads him to socialize with a wolf. Buck's trips into the wild are longer and longer. As he returns from one such trip, he finds his master and his associate killed by Indians. Buck avenges them by killing the Indians before following the wolf and answering the call of the wild.

The novel, as many of London's other stories, was inspired to him by the year he spent in Alaska at the time of the Klondike gold rush. As for the genre, it is part of the American pastoralism movement in which the mythical hero returns to nature. Besides being a straightforward critic of humanity and its materialism, the novel builds upon Darwinist theories of the survival of the fittest.

depiction of men's world. In *Treasure Island*, young Jim is embarked onto an exciting journey which would serve as a true rite of passage. Along the book he is torn apart between his friendship for Long John Silver and his allegiance to doctor Livesey and Squire Trelawney. While Jim's main motive is to go for a great adventure, Stevenson depicts both the pirates and the loyal side as mostly moved by greed. As a kid, I do not remember this setting to appear so clearly to me. I rather felt afraid of Pew the blind beggar and excited as Jim escapes from the company of Long John Silver to wander around the island on his own. Although Stevenson never went on such an expedition, it is not pure chance that his most famous book is an adventure tale. He himself repeatedly engaged in long travels and wrote books out of them. His first published work "An Inland Voyage" (1878) recounts his canoeing trip on the rivers of Belgium and Northern France. "Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes" (1879) is an account of a journey in Southern France mountains. Although I ignored these biographical notes when I first read *Treasure Island*, they retrospectively and for obvious reasons became important for my liking of Stevenson. I particularly appreciate his involvement within his environment. Not writing only from second-hand experience, Stevenson did experience such things as long rowing journeys or wild camping. In its main themes, "Huckleberry Finn" is pretty similar to "Treasure Island". It is above all a sharp social satire. And again as a child, what I appreciated the most was the luck of Huck and Jim to live along the river, wander freely on their raft, fish their food and live dazzling adventures. As in *Treasure Island*, Huck regularly faces difficult choices while adults are all equally stupid and corrupted. I dare to



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think that these are universal themes and can be understood outside of the cultural context of 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

In addition to these children books, my taste for nature continued to grow later on through other fictional or non-fictional works rather directed at an adult audience. “Walden” (1854) from Thoreau is a book one keeps coming back to. Once more it may be American and of high importance for American culture, it also deeply marked non-American readers and certainly was of significance for the environmentalist movement worldwide. In addition, films such as “Dersu Uzala” (1975) by Kurosawa and “Jeremiah Johnson” (1972) by Sydney Pollack rank among my favourites. One is Russian, the other American. The two films share many similarities. More important to me is how they confront over-confident “white men” with wilderness. Unequipped to fare in the woods both Russian geometers and inexperienced Jeremiah Johnson must rely on people knowing their trade in the persons of Dersu and Bear Claw. In addition, both films are sharp critiques of the usual condescension with which Americans and Russians treat indigenous populations. Even though Jeremiah Johnson was known as the “Crow killer”, in Pollack's film his blood thirst is the consequence of dramatic events initially triggered by an expeditionary force refusing to take his warning seriously and trespassing a Crow sacred place. In Kurosawa's film, Arseniev's life is repeatedly saved by Dersu's skills and fine understanding of his environment which brings the Russian captain to show great respect for the Nanai tribesman who he first saw as unintelligent and eccentric.

**Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**

Written by Mark Twain, it was first published in 1884 as a sequel to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The story starts as Huck's father reappears in the town of St. Petersburg on the shore of Mississippi River, gains back custody over Huck and moves him to his wilderness cabin. Although Hucks prefers that over his life at Widow Douglas', he resents over his father's drunkenness and violence and eventually sets off down the Mississippi. He meets slave Jim who escaped slavery and intends to reach Ohio to buy his freedom. The two continue their journey together on a raft they find, living of the river. The journey is the occasion for Huck to change his view about slavery, people and life in general. After many adventures, Jim is recaptured but set free after the will of his owner then passed away. Huck finds relief as he hears of the death of his father and can return to St. Petersburg without fear.

The novel is a sharp social satire and a moral tale. Mark Twain describes it as "a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat"<sup>i</sup>. Usually considered as one of the greatest American Novel, it can be considered as a part of the pastoralist movement as its heroe finds salvation in nature, away from the civilised world.

<sup>i</sup>Victor A. Doyno (1991), *Writing Huck Finn: Mark Twain's Creative Process*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

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These books and these films have long been major sources of inspiration. I sometimes still hear the call of the wild which so often resonated at my child's ears. From the many times I spent and keep spending in the woods, I developed a deep respect for nature. Although I appreciate life in cities, I regularly need to retreat to the woods alone, to be for sometimes in a one-to-one relationship with the natural environment. All this burst from cultural masterpieces which are not the monopoly of a single nation, or a single people but shared by humanity in its entirety in so that the values that they carry are universal.

### **Return to nature?**

Several of the fictional works mentioned in the previous chapter share in common the myth of the return to nature. They draw a sharp opposition between a morally corrupted civilisation and nature assumed to be, if not moral, at least amoral. This opposition is anything but recent. Diogene of Sinope already preferred the company of dogs to that of his contemporaries. To a certain extent, I reckon that this same myth has been influential for my coming to Finland. At 18 years of age, willing to spend time in nature, I took a map of Europe and spotted Finnish Lapland as the emptiest part of the continent. On maps, Lapland appears as a large area of lakes and forests with very few settlements. Although it is, as the rest of Finland, largely a man-made landscape with its many tracks and drain ditches, it does offer plenty of occasions of enjoying moments of serenity on a lake shore in a one-to-one relationship with nature.

To cover the topic of return to nature could easily take an entire thesis. We will therefore limit ourselves to a few remarks. To start with, it is common place that ramping industrialisation has put ecosystems under unprecedented pressure. The theme of return could thus stem from the ecological sensitivity of their advocates. This may hold true today but the theme appeared before industrialisation, indicating that it was first justified on moral grounds. Towards the end of the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne opposes barbarous Europeans to

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the tribe of Tupinamba in Brazil who live in perfect harmony with nature. The latte's society is seen as purer than “the social state” of Europeans:

“And yet for all this, our taste confesses a flavour and delicacy excellent even to emulation of the best of ours, in several fruits wherein those countries abound without art or culture. Neither is it reasonable that art should gain the pre-eminence of our great and powerful mother nature. We have so surcharged her with the additional ornaments and graces we have added to the beauty and riches of her own works by our inventions, that we have almost smothered her; yet in other places, where she shines in her own purity and proper lustre, she marvellously baffles and disgraces all our vain and frivolous attempts.”<sup>41</sup>

The same fascination for indigenous people is found in Thoreau's “Walden” in which he writes that their race “was degraded by contact with the civilized man<sup>42</sup>” and repeatedly praises their way of life closer to nature than that of settlers as in the following quote:

“If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world.”

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41 Michel de Montaigne (1998), *Des Cannibales*, in *Essais*, Paris, France: Pocket Classiques, p.129

42 Henry David Thoreau, *op.cit.*, p. 22

43 *Ibid.*, p. 51

The writings of Montaigne and Thoreau suggest that indigenous people are a form of “young humanity”<sup>44</sup>, still living in the Eden Garden and making one with nature, what is conventionally referred to as the myth of “the noble savage”. The advance of philosophy and ethnology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century largely refuted the naïve idealisation of indigenous. Still, the depiction of nature as pure, uncorrupted and paradisaical as opposed to the corrupted and overrated civilised world has remained. From there stems the myth of return: it would be to escape from a civilization which took the wrong path away from the natural and somewhat sacred human origins. Unsurprisingly the most zealous advocates of a return to nature are often themselves pure products of civilization. Hence, Lawrence Buell kindly teases by describing Thoreau as “the Harvard-educated and genteelly subsidized misogynist”<sup>45</sup>. Their background explains a certain cultural astigmatism: while the relationship of native Americans with nature is idealised, the remaining pagan traditions in Europe featuring a similar inclusion of humans in nature is absent from their thinking. In fact, some of these customs are still alive. Although they nowadays primarily serve an entertainment function, masquerades are the occasion of reviving ancestral rituals in which people celebrate their very special position within nature. In a recent book, Charles Fréger photographed costumed people in such masquerades all around Europe.<sup>46</sup> What is striking is that similar patterns appear in as culturally different countries as Finland and Greece. All over Europe, costumes

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44 Jacques Cartier (2002), *Voyages au Canada*, Québec: Lux Éditeur

45 Lawrence Buell (1995), *The Environmental Imagination*, Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, p.39

46 Charles Fréger (2012), *Wilder Mann – the image of the savage*, Stockport, UK: Dewi Lewis Publishing

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are made of organic materials such as furs, feathers, branches, mosses and so on. Animals such as goats and bears are impersonated in many countries. Costumes also often display large penises, horns or bells. In addition, similar myths of origins are found in distant location. In Archangelsk Carelia as well as in mountainous France, there are legends according to which certain families descend from the union of a maid and a bear. Such tale is also found in Finland and there exists photographic evidence of ritual wedding ceremonies.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the specific form these masquerades take, they all stand for the complex bonds humans keep with nature. In the postface of Fréger's book, Geneviève Gauckler writes:

“[The] bells as well as the plant and animal matter of the costume, connect the Wild Man to his natural origins; however, through the way they stand and through his dance, he is also a part of the cultural sphere – the coat of skin could equally belong to a sheperd. His costume is therefore ambiguous, as is his role in the tradition of mask. Able to be self-sufficient, he is sometimes subordinated to other characters, generally humans although often also hybrids. He embodies the complex relationship of love and hate which man maintains with his environment”<sup>48</sup>

When considering the notion of return to nature, my intuition is that it is the kind of relationship symbolized by these masquerades that is longed for, that is a sense of inclusion of humans in nature which weakened as science and industry progressed. In this way nature serves as a counterpoint to what is seen as an increasingly corrupted and immoral society.

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47 Ritva Kovalainen & Sanni Seppo, op.cit.

48 Charles Fréger, op.cit., p.243



Illustration 8: Schab - Austria, Charles Fréger



Illustration 9: Nuttipukki - Finland, Charles Fréger



Illustration 10: Ours - France, Charles Fréger



Illustration 11: Men performing bear-killing dances - Finland, 1877



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### **The critical stand of Finnish artists of the 1960s and 1970s**

We concluded the previous chapter by examining how Finnish artists of the Golden Age had shaped what appears today as the traditional understanding of nature. Despite its persistence today, at least in popular culture, their interpretation of the concept has been radically challenged by artist of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finland became an independent country in 1917. The civil war sharply split the society into two antagonist sides. National reunion occurred only through the tragic events of the Second World War which led Finland to give up a third of its territory and remain in the shadow of its Soviet neighbour for the next forty years. These events incited artists to look at “the nation” from a much more distanced point of view, being more often critics than zealots. “Mannerheim and the waves of Lake Onega” (1970) by Leo Lindsten perfectly illustrates this loss of innocence. The background of the picture is a view of lake Onega in Carelia. On the foreground, a portrait of Marshall Mannerheim (in the making?) stands on an easel. With this sarcastic painting, Lindsten distances himself from the myth of Great Finland and the sacred character of Carelia. A dual mise-en-abyme reveals the critical stance of the artist towards Finnish nationalism and the particular meaning of Carelia for Finnish identity. The first mise-en-abyme is purely visual as the painting is one of a painting and deals with the meaning of Carelia for collective identity. The second one touches more to the position of the artist and questions the way he, as an artist, should look at the landscapes of Carelia. Lindsten produced



Illustration 12: "Mannerheim and the waves of Lake Onega", Leo Lindsten, 1970

many other paintings in the same vein such as "Mannerheim wearing a summer dress" (1973), "Liberator of Carelia" (1974) and "Mannerheim falls off his horse" (1978). Harro Koskinen was another radical critic of Finnish nationalism. He was prosecuted for his "Coat of Arm of Pigs" (1968) representing the authorities and was sentenced for blasphemy. In his "Finland" series he repeatedly used the Finnish flag and represented it torn, swollen,



Illustration 13: "Coat of Arms of Pigs", Kimmo Kaivanto, 1968

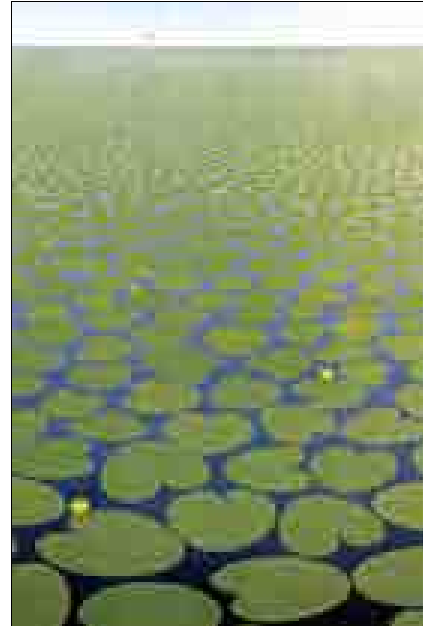


Illustration 14: "When the sea dies II", Kimmo Kaivanto, 1973

hollowed, burnt and so on. This was a direct critique of the 1970 elections and the right-wing party slogan: "Finnish way of life".

The way artists dealt with nature also changed radically from that of their predecessors. Nature was no more instrumental to the reinforcement of national pride. Finnish artists took the shade off their eyes and started to point at environmental damages.

While art from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Finland was largely an enterprise of cultural translation - that is using techniques developing worldwide to deal with local topics - Finnish artists of the 1960s and 1970s adopted a global position not only in technical terms but also in regard with the object of their art by embracing the burgeoning environmental movement. Kimmo Kaivanto's "When the sea dies II" (1973) leaves an awkward feeling with the viewer. The painting is one of a seemingly endless sea of waterlilies. The feeling of oneiric beauty it conveys is misleading as the beautiful lilies are the symptom of industrial pollution and eutrophication of waters.

The detachment or even criticism of Finnish artists from the nationalism of their predecessors is characteristic to the general autonomisation of the arts which occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artists radically challenged all the conventions art was subjected to. In visual arts as in other disciplines, there was nearly no area which did not undergo a complete redefinition. From materials to objects, from techniques to audiences, art literally broke out of the canvas it was once confined to. Artists could from then on be critical and reflect directly on their own experience of the world. Finnish artists and their approach to nature make no exception to this.

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### 3. ENGAGEMENT

In the two previous chapters, we have seen that identification with nature can burst from local traditions as well as from cosmopolitan sources. I explained that the space of flow in which we live does not carry values leading to adverse effects on nature. Still, the conditions of identification with a specific place remain to be specified. The central proposition of this thesis is that this can be carried out only through engagement with environment. Nature as it is evoked in adventure stories, in the myth of return or in political art of the 1960s, is a concept. Finnish lakes are but one occurrence of it. From a Finnish identity perspective, to identify this environment with its cultural construction dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century is straightforward and unproblematic. On the contrary, the conditions under which one can build a bridge between a more cosmopolitan understanding of nature and a local natural environment are to be clarified. In the end, Jack London's novels take place in North America. To draw a link between them and Finnish nature, one needs to appropriate the environment. For this, the only option is to engage with the latter. The notion of engagement was outlined by Arnold Berleant who considers that a given environment cannot be experienced from the outside. On the contrary, its appreciation can only be achieved through experience, including all of the senses as well as the cultural dimension of the said environment. This is what I have tried to achieve with *Looking for Risto*. The narrative

dimension of the work is a direct reference to what first brought me to forests, that is adventures stories which marked my childhood. Other elements of the project, the decision to travel by boat, the emphasis on the use of recycled materials and on self-reliance aimed at fostering a sense of engagement with the environment, mental and physical. In this chapter, I will explain in greater detail these different aspects after a rapid presentation of selected Finnish artist whose art, for various reasons, come close to my own approach.

### **Some influential Finnish artists**



Illustration 15: "Bare Necessities", 2002, Antti Laitinen

Antti Laitinen's "Bare Necessities" (2002) is probably the first artwork which I consciously and clearly identified as environmental art, long before I decided to enrol in the environmental art MA program at Aalto University. For this work Laitinen spent four days in the forest without food, drinking water and clothes and documented the experience. The performance questions everyone's relationship to nature: people are keen on spending time in

the forest but how is it to be there as an animal, leaving behind all the gears of modernity? In its form, the work relies heavily on the personal and individual relationship of the artist with its environment. Laitinen did not emulate life with bare necessities. He did not only take a photograph of a naked man in the forest. Instead he himself engaged with the environment for a long enough period without any buffer between him and the environment. Coming closer to my own work, in “Bark boat” (2010) Laitinen crossed the Baltic sea aboard a three meters long bark boat. To build bark boats is a classic children game. It only requires fixing a twig on a piece of pine bark. By building one such boat on a 1:1 scale and actually using it, Laitinen

demonstrated that one needs not leave children fantasies behind and that once grown up, it is possible to take them seriously. This is manifest as well in his other works “It's my island” (2007) and “Voyage” (2008). The reinterpretation of children fantasies is one aspect in Laitinen's work which I particularly appreciate. The way this is carried out is another aspect

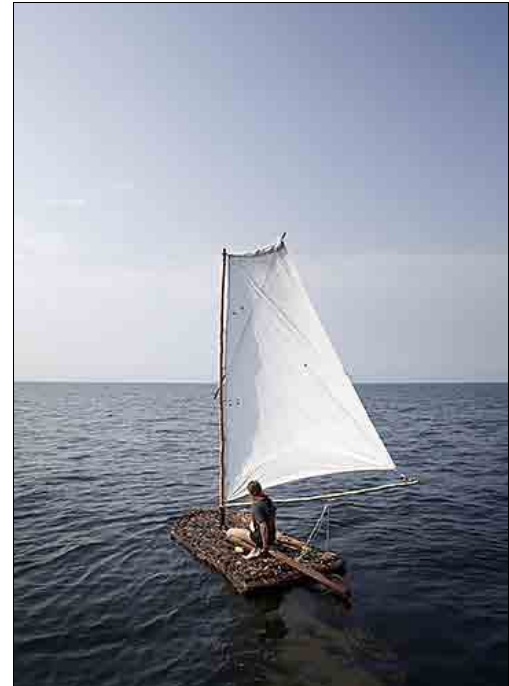


Illustration 16: "Bark boat",  
2010, Antti Laitinen

which touches me: his works may appear as games but games that are played seriously. The boats and islands are not built for the purpose of exhibitions in closed gallery space. They are used for their primary functions: travelling. We will see in a subsequent section that the notion of travel is important for the current project as it is a central feature of adventure tales. Besides, the raft I built as well as Laitinen's boat are not mere symbols. They make a thorough engagement with the environment possible. One does not cross the Baltic sea or spend three weeks on the lakes with just a toy. The raft must be functional.

Jussi Kivi is one of the best renowned Finnish environmental artist and was awarded with Ars Fennica price in 2010. As Antti Laitinen's, his work relies heavily on his own personal relationship with the environment. However, unlike Laitinen, the emphasis on tales and fantasies is not as straightforward. Kivi's works consist mostly of landscape photographs, drawings and mappings done after hiking and skiing expeditions, most often in Finland. With these materials, Kivi regularly sets installations which are unsettling for the audience as they borrow from aesthetics of old scientific proceedings. This form of nostalgia is where the sense of fantasy lies in Kivi's art. As Kivi's work, *Looking for Risto* stems from a journey in backwoods of Finland although my aesthetic strategy differs from his. Unlike Jussi Kivi, I do not rely on the image of the 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer in displaying my work. I make use of modern technologies not only for the making of art but also for publication. I do not try to emulate the patina of time by using hand-drawn maps and report-like plates. I consider that engaging with nature, bringing the adventure forward needs not to rest on nostalgia.



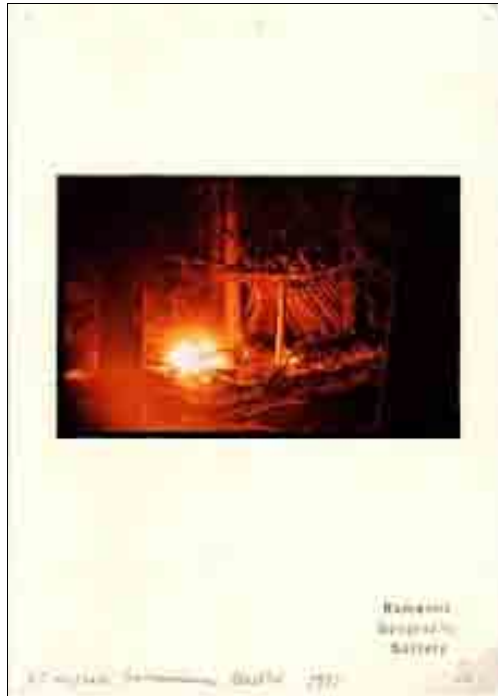


Illustration 18: "Elimyssalo, old camp site in the vicinity of Saunaniemi", 1990, Jussi Kivi

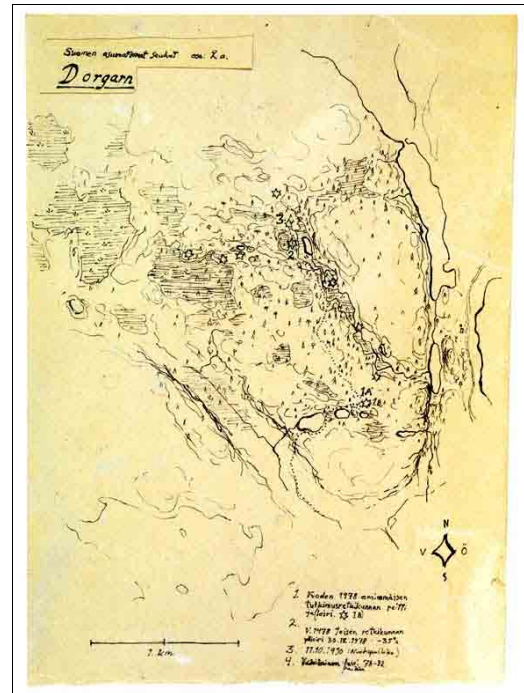


Illustration 17: "Dorgarn - the uninhabited areas of Finland part 2 a", Jussi Kivi, 1991

The work of Pekka Kainulainen is mostly performative. During the last thirty years, he has impersonated various characters who have made regular appearances. In this way, we could see his art as a life-long performance. Flirting with absurdity, Kainulainen explores conflicts between "the social reality and the

private reality of an individual human mind”.<sup>49</sup> One way to deal with this topic is to underline the incompatibility of his characters with their immediate surroundings. Such is the case of the wounded soldier wearing skis and moving with crutches in snowless city streets or struggling in water. Kainulainen's performances are often painful for the artist, as in “The messenger” (1997) in which a gnome (one of Kainulainen's many characters) dives into a heart shaped hole in the ice to search for speed in Manala (the land of the dead) and is reborn



Illustration 19: “The messenger”, 1997,  
Pekka Kainulainen

as a human before turning into a Reindeer Man. For Kainulainen, “suffering stems from struggle, the original relationship between man and the laws of nature.”<sup>50</sup> The sense of absurd and the interweaving of fiction and reality in Kainulainen's work are two elements I have intended to include in my own work. Instead of a

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.pekkakainulainen.fi>, retrieved August 2012

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

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gnome and a reindeer man, I have myself and Risto to deal with. Instead on skis, I have decided to travel by means of a raft.

I have chosen to present the works of Finnish artists. I could have probably introduced foreign artists as well but I considered it to be more interesting to examine possible ways of interacting with the environment in the narrower Finnish context as it is what I am concerned with in this thesis. As I explained above, I share some aspects of my work with each of them. Particularly, I consider my work to be in line with theirs regarding the intent to engage with the environment. Still, my point of view remains personal and necessarily differs from theirs, especially in the way I published my work.

## Engagement

The artworks presented in the section above are characterized by a strong engagement of the artists with their environment. By engagement, I do not only mean that the works are primarily set within the environment. I also mean that the artists make use of all their senses to apprehend the former. The notion of “engagement” with environment has been best coined by Arnold Berleant. His starting point is that a given environment has many more qualities than its visual aspect. More importantly, Berleant reminds us that it is impossible to experience the environment from the outside:

“Philosophic custom has identified sight and hearing as the easthetic senses, since they allow a kind of unperturbed reflection so long associated with ideal beauty. To introduce the other senses into aesthetic perception we must overcome established tradition for relying on the close involvement of the body disrupts the lofty contemplation considered essential for aesthetic pleasure. This is an unfortunate division of the senses, especially for the perception of environment, from which we can never distance ourselves.”<sup>51</sup>

Hence, to engage with the environment should be regarded as a complete experience, in which all the senses are stimulated and taken into account. Indeed, it is not rare that other features such as the air temperature, noises, the way we feel the ground under our feet and so

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51 Arnold Berleant (2002), *Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience*, in A. Berleant (Ed.), *Environment and the arts*, Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publidshing, p.7

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on, are more determining than sight in the experience of the environment. From a very young age, first with my father and later by myself, I have been used to walk outdoors in complete darkness. Although one gets to see shapes and shadows after a few minutes, sight in such settings provides us with very little sensations. On the opposite, a sudden drop of temperature will clearly indicate a humid area, the feel of the ground is a guide to keep on the path, the barking of a dog far away a clear indication of the direction towards which to walk back to the village. Similarly, to find caves in the limestone massifs of southern France, sight is close to completely useless. One of the best way is to stick your head in faults and smell. If a cavern is hidden under, the air will smell musty and mildewy. To apprehend this environment only from sight is to miss a large part of the picture: the underground is full of caves and tunnels which entrances are most often invisible.

Engagement has been a lasting pattern in environmental arts, although the method varies from one artist to the other. Kazuo Shiraga's "Challenging Mud" (1955) depicts a very straightforward understanding of the concept. In this works he literally blends in the land. By looking at the pictures documenting the work one can easily imagine the feel of mud on his body: cold, wet and yet leaving a feeling of dehydration on the skin.

Amish Fulton's approach differs from the one of Shiraga's and comes closer to my own. Fulton is known for having conducted his entire career doing what he calls "walk art". He walked in many countries in the world, in a wide variety of environments and in many

different forms (group and solo walks, one-minute walks and months long, in wilderness and on road). Experiencing the environment is central to Fulton's approach:

“As an artist, I believe that walking offers scope for inventiveness – Walking is an experience not an object – Walking 'uses' what is already there – Walking is not an art material – Every piece of art results from the experiences of a specific walk -”<sup>52</sup>



Illustration 20: "Rock Fall Echo Dust  
(A Twelve and a Half Day walk on Baffin  
Island Arctic Canada Summer 1988)",  
1988, Hamish Fulton

Every walk Fulton makes translates into words and sometimes photographs he uses in subsequent exhibitions. Far from concentrating on the visual aspect, Fulton's exhibitions convey a wide range of the sensations he experienced during the walk.

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52 Hamish Fulton (2010), *Hamish Fulton*, Visual Studies, vol. 25, no. 1

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In *Looking for Risto*, I adopted a strategy close to that of Fulton in order to engage with my environment: like him, I embarked on a journey. Although I did not walk, we will see later that boating offers an opportunity for deep engagement because of the low speed and the reliance on natural locomotion. There is however a dimension that I tried to underline more than Fulton does, that of a narrative related to the environment. We have seen in the previous chapters that an environment consists not only of physical features but also of a cultural layer giving it meaning. Engagement, to its fullest acceptation shall also include this dimension. Berleant says no other thing:

“ Factors other than those directly sensed join shape and bend our experience. For sensation is not just sensory and not only physiological; it fuses with cultural influences. This is, in fact, the only way cultural organisms like humans can experience.”<sup>53</sup>

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53 Arnold Berleant, op.cit., p.8

## **An adventure**

Narratives are part of the cultural layer which is constitutive of a given environment. To build on Laitinen's "Bark Boat", when seeing large bark chunks on an old pine tree, one may remember childhood games rather than seeing mere brown organic matter. *Looking for Risto* relies largely on a narrative. In fact, the title itself is one of a story, a promise for adventure. Besides the will of engagement, one reason to deal with the topic through a narrative is simply a matter of personal taste: in my art practice I often adopt a playful approach. It is important for me to enjoy my time, have fun while doing art and I hope to convey a similar feeling to my audience. I believe that complex topics can be tackled in a light way. In the history of environmental art, there are only few examples of artworks which are straightforwardly constructed on a narrative. One of the most known example would be Charles Simonds' "Landscape – Body – Dwelling" (1971) and "Dwelling" (1974). In both works, Simonds constructed dwellings for imaginary "Little People". Despite this example, fictional stories are only rarely at the core of visual artists' works, unlike in literature and cinema.

I have explained earlier that among fictional works I read or watched as a child, adventure stories particularly touched me. From there stemmed the will to engage in an adventure of my own. Travels in adventure's books are often the occasion for the author to include magical elements to the plot. The odd and unusual is found away from the sphere of





Illustration 21: "Landscape - Body - Dwelling", 1974, Charles Simmonds

comfort which home is. Once projected in an unfamiliar environment, the characters may be disoriented and unable to rationally defy magical events. In *Treasure Island* both Jim and the pirates think at some point that the Island is haunted. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses and his companions face all sort of events defying logic. On the Aegean Sea they are the toys of gods. In *Tristan and Isolde*, the plot is entirely based on a mistake the two future lovers do when they inadvertently drink a love potion while aboard a ship. Unaccustomed to travelling, their consciousness is affected and they mistake the potion for a mere flask of water.

The proportion of adventure stories including, or even entirely centred on a boat journey, is noticeable. Besides “*The Odyssey*” and “*Tristan and Isolde*” we have already mention “*Treasure Island*” and “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*”. We could also refer to

Noah's episode of the Bible, other stories from the Greek mythology such as the one of Jason and the Argonauts, the expedition to get the Sampo back in the “Kalevala”, Jules Verne's “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea” and of course, “Robinson Crusoe”. My guess is that humans have for long considered boats as very particular artefacts in so that they provide means to explore environments otherwise inaccessible. They can take their passengers beyond the horizon and in case of a storm or other acts of God, ships can be wrecked on unknown lands which environments are completely unusual to survivors. This was one reason for the story of *Looking for Risto* to revolve around a boat travel. In this setting, it would be easy to build narratives. The story was not written before hand. I certainly had some ideas of various episodes I could include and of the general direction but the plot was mostly built after my feelings on a given day. To camp in a swamp or on a rocky islet, to row on perfectly still waters or sail on a stormy lake convey radically different impressions. In this way, *Looking for Risto* was an interesting experiment of interaction of reality and fiction.

## Rafting

Besides the will to live a story, more pragmatic reasons justified the choice to travel by boat. Before listing these various reasons, it should be mentioned that the use of boat in arts is not rare. We have already mentioned the case of Anti Laitinen and his bark boat. A more famous art work is that of Swoon who built rafts and travelled with them in several locations such as the Mississippi River, the Hudson river and the Grand Canal in Venice. Beyond the raft, there are some other aspects of her work which relate to mine, such as the will to question “the precious nature of the art object [which] is subverted by her use of trash and recycled goods”<sup>54</sup> or the will to build “more than just objects or vessels, but also create an experience”<sup>55</sup>. Another example would be the one of Simon Starling and his “Shedboatshed (mobile architecture no. 2)” (2005). For this work,



Illustration 22: Swimming Cities, 2008, Swoon

<sup>54</sup> Robert Klanten & al. (2011), *Art and Agenda*, Berlin, Germany: Die Gestalten Verlag

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Starling found a wooden shed, got it transformed into a boat, floated down the Rhine River and got it rebuilt for exhibition<sup>56</sup>. In this case, although the building of a raft is central to the work, I consider it to be quite different from my own work: rather than an experience, Starling's work is more a sort of gesture. He travelled only for eight kilometres on the Rhine River and indeed no longer travel was needed to make the work



Illustration 23: Shedboatshed (mobile architecture no. 2), 2005, Simon Starling

meaningful. In contrast, my raft was a fully functional vessel designed to endure weeks of sailing.

Coming back to *Looking for Risto*, one of my main goals with travelling by raft was to leave as much room as possible to the experience, to engagement with environment. We have seen with the case of Hamish Fulton that walking journeys are a good approach to enhance engagement with the environment. I think that Fulton appreciates this mode of transportation for its simplicity. Our feet were indeed humanity's first vehicle. However there are some environments in which it may prove difficult to solely rely on walking. For one not being a

<sup>56</sup> Michael Perry (2011), *The Art of not making*, London, UK: Thames&Hudson

messiah, it will obviously be hard to experience oceans by foot. The lake district in Eastern Finland is another environment in which walking is difficult although in much lesser extent than on oceans. From the Southern shores of the Saimaa basin to its northernmost reaches, land and water mingle together in an inextricable maze of islands, capes, peninsulas, bays and straits. To walk in such an environment would oblige one to remain on the few land routes and rely on bridges and ferries to go forward. It would certainly be an experience, the one of clearly delimited paths, of asphalted routes, of channelled traffic. The situation is of course radically different in winter when waters are frozen. In fact, wintry Finland is another country, another environment and we will concentrate on these seasons when water is free of ice. Roughly from May to November, to travel by boat appears to be the best way to move around the lake district. Boating is without a doubt a more recent activity than walking. It remains that humans have used boats for millennia as evidenced by archaeological research. The Kon-Tiki<sup>57</sup> experiment has even proved that prehistoric populations could have used rafts for intercontinental migrations. It is also probable that the first tribes who populated Finland once ice recessed farther North where using boats. The rock paintings of Astuvansalmi depict nine boats among other figures.<sup>58</sup> Thus, I consider that travelling on a raft is to some extent as genuine as walking, especially when walks are done with a technologically advanced gear improved by thousands years of research called shoes.

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57 Thor Heyerdahl (1990), *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Seas*, London, UK: Pocket Books

58 Unesco World Heritage site, [whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/220/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/220/), retrieved August 2012

Before and during the journey, I was repeatedly asked me why I did not use a motor. In the end, if the use of a simple artefact such as a raft is acceptable, why would the one of a more complex human invention would not be? The rejection of motorized locomotion does not stem from an essentialist position but from practical reasons. At the core of my project was



Illustration 24: Rock painting of a boat in Astuvansalmi

the will to experience environment. To use a motor would seriously hamper this aim. In an insightful essay, Kaia Lehari<sup>59</sup> compares the way we experience a landscape while walking and while driving a car. Her argument is not normative. Only does she points out similarities and differences between the two modes of transportation. For instance, she notes that “the sector of humans' sharp vision is 150' when standing, by moving at the speed of 80 km/h it becomes narrower to 60', at the speed of 130km/h it is 30'.”<sup>60</sup> Although boats usually cruise at slower speeds than cars, they as well reduce one's field of vision. Besides, anyone who has been aboard a motor boat knows that it also deprives one from hearing anything but the engine and the wind blowing at one's ears. The environment to be experienced does not then expand much further than the boat's freeboards. Another reason not to rely on an engine was

59 Kaia Lehari (2008), *Wandering in a landscape*, in Emily Brady (Ed.), *Humans in the land*, Oslo, Norway: Oslo University Press

60 Ibid.

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the will to experience distance. To be slow and to move by the only means of wind and muscles gives a better feeling of distances than the effortless steering of a speedboat. Engines and the speed they allow do not compress only time but also distance. As a matter of fact, because of modern means of transportation, it is nowadays more common to talk about the time it takes to go from one place to another rather than about objective distance: “I work an hour away from home”; “Saint Petersburg is only four hours away from Helsinki”. By ways of rafting, it took me two weeks to go from Lappeenranta to Savonlinna. The same distance is covered in three hours by train. Beyond time dimension, distance leaves marks on one's body when covered by means of muscles. Hours of rowing cause blisters to appear in one's palm and exhaustion feeling. Put like this, it may sound like a masochist option. Why to endure physical pain when it is so easy to rely on modern solutions? The point is that these modern means of transportation are exclusively designed to take their passengers from one point to the other. The time and environment between these two points is seen as a waste. In comparison, to travel with a rowing or a sailing boat or by walking puts a strong emphasis on this “in between”. Each stroke, each step can be consciously thought in separation from the one before and the one after. Instead of an evanescent feeling, one gets to experience every single meter of the journey. In the past, rowing or walking may have fulfilled the same function as motorized transports do nowadays. They do not anymore. They are only optional and anyone has the choice, either to get somewhere or to take a journey to somewhere.

It appears that despite appearances, rafting comes close to the experience of walking. It is physically challenging and mentally rewarding. The buffer between one's body and the environment is of the thinnest kind. If the texture of the ground is not felt under the feet, the raft rocks on waves, tiny and gentle or large and frightening. The landscape changes only gradually. Its various features shyly unveil and stay in sight for hours if not days. After dawn on cloudy days, nights on lakes are thicker than on any road. Away from main navigation routes, there is barely any light standing out. Landmasses appear only slightly darker than the water and the sky so that one has to rely on other senses but sight. The low vibrations of the fishing rod or the waves breaking at the bow are often the only clear sign of moving forward. In order to feel the direction of the wind there is no better weathervane than the two aisles of one's nose. The rows feel like prolonged hands. Currents are not always noticeable with sight. When rowing, the slightest stream makes a difference. These are some examples of the way rafting provides an opportunity to deeply engage with the environment. To conclude this short discussion, one would remember that Thoreau, probably the most famous apologist of walking, started his literary career with publishing an account of his journey down the Concord and Merrimack rivers<sup>61</sup> and kept paddling his life long as is asserted in "Maine Woods"<sup>62</sup>.

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61 Henry David Thoreau (2001), *A week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, New York, USA: Dover Thrift Editions

62 Henry David Thoreau (1972), *Maine woods*, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press



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## **Materials**

Within the field of environmental arts, the emphasis has often been put on the choice and use of materials. Many artists working in natural environments intend to rely solely on what they find on spot while others look for creating a sharp contrast between industrially processed materials displayed in a more natural setting. Robert Smithon's "Asphalt Rundown" (1969) belongs to the second category. This work conveys strong feelings and is controversial in its form. On the contrary, the works of Andy Goldsworthy reveal a conscious effort to rely solely on materials found on the spot, particularly its finest pieces, made of such evanescent materials as leaves, ice bits or feathers. Other artists take an even more radical stance and intend not to rearrange physical matter, altering the environment only by making use of their body. Denis Oppenheim's "Parallel Stress" (1970) is a typical of example. The core of Oppenheim's work lies in the relationship of the body and its direct physical environment, not in the agency of physical matter.

**Equipment taken aboard**

- 1 Swiss army knife
- 1 screw driver and half a dozen screws.
- 1 hammer
- 1 axe
- 1 saw
- 30m of iron wire
- half a role of duct tape
- a dozen of nails
- 7 rubber bands
- 1 role of sowing thread and 1 needle
- 10 candles
- 2 lighters
- fishing equipment
- a piece of salvaged fabric
- 10m of marine string

In the present project, although I did make use of my body, I also gathered materials in the environment to create artefacts. I have always liked crafting. I find the process of turning a rough piece of wood into a useful utensil or a beautiful accessory with a single knife rewarding. For this project, I only had a limited set of tools and materials at disposal, not withstanding that most of them were taken aboard not with the aim of making art but for security or other practical reasons. When wild camping, it is necessary to be able to feed yourself (fish was my only source of proteins), make a fire (I did not carry artificial combustible), fix your gears (and the raft).

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In such conditions I relied on materials found on the spot for the bulk of the works I produced. The gathering area varied greatly according to weather conditions. On rainy days, while I spent most of my time sheltered under a canopy, the area did not expand farther than a circle of twenty meters in diameter around the camp. What first seems to be a drag, to be confined on a three square meters area and gather material in the immediate vicinity, eventually appeared to be a fruitful constraint. Instead of running to the closest hardware shop when facing difficulty, I had to make do with immediate resources and bend the idea to fit the local conditions or come up with original solutions. This was an efficient way to engage further with the environment. Such an approach is also a perfect way to acquire a better understanding of an ecosystem. When collecting pine cones, one will learn how they look when young and unopened, when the decaying process has started, when squirrels and other rodents have fed on it and so on. Floating reeds are another type of fascinating ecosystem by themselves. They are pushed ashore in bunches and look from the distance as dry, light and homogeneous materials. In fact, they are soaked with water, heavily compacted and shelter a wide variety of plants, insects and invertebrates travelling from one shore to another on their raft.

Beyond the use of materials during the journey, a few words on the building of the raft should be added. Recycling is at the core of my art practice. There are countless works of art whose central theme revolves around recycling. To mention but one example, Vik Muniz's "Pictures of Garbage" (2008) use trash as primary material and in addition cast the light on

gleaners of Jardim Gramacho, then the world's largest landfill on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Beyond art works dealing with recycling as a subject matter, I consider that when feasible, any art project should rely on recycling so to reduce its ecological impact. We have seen earlier that human pressure on ecosystems is so intense that we are facing the risk of generalized ecological collapse with its load of catastrophic consequences. Here is what Lester Brown writes about such an eventuality:

“In early 2009, John Beddington, chief science advisor to the U.K. government, said the world was facing a “perfect storm” of food shortages, water scarcity, and costly oil by 2030. These developments, plus accelerating climate change and mass migration across national borders, would lead to major upheavals. A week later, Jonathon Porritt, former chair of the U.K. Sustainable Development Commission, wrote in the Guardian that he agreed with Beddington’s analysis but that the timing was off. He thinks the crisis ‘will hit much closer to 2020 than 2030.’ He calls it the “ultimate recession”—one from which there may be no recovery.”<sup>63</sup>

After such a gloomy forecast, it is inconceivable not to take it into account into one's art practice. As Ossi Naukkarinen puts it in his “Art of the Environment”,

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63 Lester Brown (2011), *World on the edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*, Earth Policy Institute

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“art has no special position in comparison with any other human endeavours. At the end of the day it does not really matter whether you make or use a bus, a sausage or oil paints. In all cases materials and energy are consumed, which affects the environment”<sup>64</sup>

In the field of environmental art in which nature is so often central to artists' thinking, it may be even more necessary than in other disciplines to take in consideration the ecological impact of artistic projects in order to avoid contradiction between aims and means. To build my raft cost me less than 50 Euros. Most of the materials have been gathered or salvaged from old works. The benches came from a shelf-bed-hut project I produced four years ago. The flooring and beams were ripped off a project by Scott Elliott entitled “Passage” (2011)<sup>65</sup>. The barrels had previously been part of “Imaging other worlds” (2012) by Jane Hughes<sup>66</sup>. The ropes were previously used in an outdoor exhibition for Helsinki's Night of the Arts<sup>67</sup>. The sail was sown with fabrics left overs from a project entitled “Face that void” (2011-2012)<sup>68</sup>. The oars, rudder and fin have been sawn from wood left over from my own “Death of Venus” (2012). Besides salvaged artworks, a few parts were purchased from recycling centres. The idea to recycle works of art and take them around Finland was agreeable and fitted well with the personal source of inspiration of the project. Now that the project has been completed, I

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64 Ossi Naukkarinen (2007), *Art of the Environment*, Helsinki, Finland: University of Art and Design, p.106

65 Scott Andrew Elliott, *Passage*, [scottandrewelliott.blogspot.fi/p/projects.html](http://scottandrewelliott.blogspot.fi/p/projects.html), retrieved August 2012

66 Jane Hughes, *Imagining other worlds*, [janehughes.ie/?p=377](http://janehughes.ie/?p=377), retrieved August 2012

67 Tristan Hamel, *Human Agenda*, [tristanhamel.eu/?page\\_id=52](http://tristanhamel.eu/?page_id=52), retrieved August 2012

68 Tristan Hamel, *Face that Void*, [tristanhamel.eu/?p=853](http://tristanhamel.eu/?p=853), retrieved August 2012

hope other artists will find new ways to use the raft, would this mean it to be torn apart. More importantly, the environmental impact of the project was limited both in terms of use of energy (2 trips to and from the lakes with a van) and in terms of use of materials and I am confident I could take up the challenge proposed by Ossi Naukkarinen in the concluding remarks to his previously mentioned book:

“Artists are responsible for what happens around them in the same extent as everyone else, from their own points of departure. When making art and dealing with art you have to understand its consequences to yourself and the environment and be prepared to justify your action in public.”<sup>69</sup>

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69 Ossi Naukkarinen, *op.cit.*, p.127

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## DIY and self-reliance

The use of materials in *Looking for Risto* is one aspect that has been carefully thought through, from the building phase to the later interventions in the woods. The decision to rely on self-made gears is equally the result of a conscious effort. I have mentioned earlier a personal taste for crafting. This inclination to craft can be deconstructed. In the end, to build things by yourself is a time-consuming activity and success is not guaranteed. As a matter of fact, I initially planned to travel not by means of a sail but with a giant kite. I liked the idea as it, once more, strongly reminded me of childhood games. I spent dozens of hours designing and sewing a eight meters long power-kite. Unfortunately, I eventually had to give up the idea as I did not manage to launch it alone. It would certainly have been a safer option to buy a second-hand kite and I could have reached this conclusion early enough in the planning process. To design a large power-kite is a complex task which can hardly be achieved without relying on computing and a specialised software. Despite having used such software, my kite still did not prove reliable enough for the journey.

Where does this taste for doing by myself comes from then? One answer is to be found in Thoreau's writings. In *Walden*, he gives a precise account of the expenses engaged for the construction of his cabin, informing us it cost him twenty eight dollars and twelve cents, adding that timber, stones and sand were claimed by squatter's right<sup>70</sup>. The economy of

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70 Henry David Thoreau (1995), *Walden; or: Life in the Woods*, New York, USA: Dover Thrift Editions

materials was naturally prolonged with an economy of working force since he built the cabin by himself. In the same vein, Thoreau describes his strategy to rely on his garden to provide for himself. It has been argued later that Thoreau slightly distorted reality. Although his way of life was with no doubt frugal, during the two years he spent by Walden's pond, he came back to Concord on a daily basis and always found material support at his relatives' or friends' <sup>71</sup>. The Walden's experiment is nonetheless an admirable effort towards self-reliance, a concept initially promoted by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>72</sup>. Emerson considers self-reliance primarily from a intellectual point of view, urging people not to feel bounded by conventions and to develop a thinking of their own. Thoreau completely adhered to this project and took it a step further by extending it to more practical sides of life. To be able to build his own house, grow his own food and generally achieve any task without the help of professionals was a means to greater freedom, in the first place from work (understood as remunerated activity):

For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found that, by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.<sup>73</sup>

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71 Michel Onfray (2009), *Contre histoire de la philosophie Vol 11 – Le siècle du Moi I*, Vincennes, France: Frémeaux & Associés

72 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1993), *Self-reliance and other essays*, New York, USA: Dover Thrift Editions

73 Henry David Thoreau, op.cit., p. 45

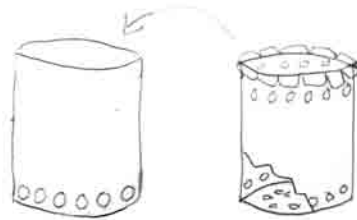


## How to make a wood stove

What you need:

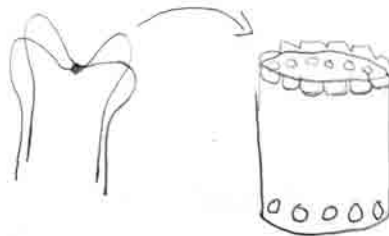
- 2 cans with slightly different diameters.
- 60cm of thick iron wire.
- a heavy duty knife.

1. Remove the upper cap of the larger can and drill 10mm holes all around the lower edge.



2. Remove the upper cap of the smaller can and make 1cm long cuts all around the edge. Fold the metal along these cuts. Drill 10mm holes all around the lower edge, the upper edge and through bottom. Insert the can in the bigger one.

3. To make a kettle holder, ply two pieces of thick iron wire and attach them from their middle. The space between the legs must be slightly larger than the small can's width. Insert into the smaller can



Further in the book he adds:

I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely; as the pursuits of the simpler nations are still the sports of the more artificial. It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do.

<sup>74</sup>

My inclination to “do-it-myself” stems from a similar effort towards self-reliance and freedom. If in today's world it may be harder than in Thoreau's time to escape from remunerated labour, it is nonetheless possible to reduce recourse to the industry. In the specific case of *Looking for Risto*, this approach has been successful. My raft made it through without serious problems. On the few occasions it had to be fixed, the simplicity of the design made it easy. In addition, I found that skills in woodworking I acquired through years of crafting proved to be useful. As I mentioned earlier, I had very few tools and even less material to use. I therefore had to rely on what I would find in the forest. This way, I managed to change the beams supporting earlocks when the original ones wore out and to replace the flooring when the board I had used was completely soaked with water and started to disintegrate. With the help of a simple axe and a saw, I split a dozen of planks out of fallen round wood and attached them to the deck with nails salvaged from other parts of the raft. I with no doubt would not have been able to get a dinghy fixed so easily. In general, it has been

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



Illustration 25: Improvised joinery

rewarding to cover some 300km on a self-made boat. The outdoors industry seems to have succeeded in imposing the idea that one needs dedicated equipment and dozens of gadgets to wander outside cities. The same holds with boating. The reason usually put forward is that of security, that a natural environment would be more dangerous than

cities. Although an accident can always

happen, I personally have the feeling that it is more dangerous to cross a street or to take a bus than to spend time on the lakes on a raft. In the same way, I always drink water directly from the lakes. Sometimes, there are tiny bugs swimming in my glass. Along the many years I wandered in the woods, I never got sick. I however was several times intoxicated in restaurants. The same extends to camping equipment. A wood stove costs close to nothing to build and one will never run out of fuel. And yet people purchase expensive gas burners. A hammock is nothing more than a piece of textile and two ropes and is easy to sow whereas pricey commercial tents are not adapted to uneven terrains of Finnish forests. In short, to be frightened, to lack confidence in one's own skills is to give up freedom and make oneself prisoner of the industry: the exact opposite of self-reliance.

## **Video Blogging and Geo-locating**

One last aspect of the project deserving discussion at this point is the decision to publish videos on a daily basis and to title them after the exact coordinates of the place they were shot. I have so far written at length about the natural environment and the aim for self-reliance. Isn't online presence and a certain sense of ubiquity incompatible with the formers?

*Looking for Risto* is a confrontation between cosmopolitan and local sources of identification with nature. It is an attempt to draw a synthesis of the two. I have argued earlier that on an individual level, local and global are not necessarily contradicting. On one hand, I found it interesting to make use of Internet as it probably symbolizes best Castell's space of flows. On the other hand, we have seen how modernity is part of Finnish identity. This does not hold true only on a conceptual level. When travelling in remote areas of Finnish countryside, telecommunication masts are one of the most noticeable landmarks. The Finnish landscape is flat. Hills rarely rise more than a hundred meters higher than surrounding waters. Hence, these masts can be seen from far and sometimes stay in sight for days. Besides, Finland is probably one of the territories in the world with the most extensive mobile Internet coverage. Historically, the country has always been a forerunner in mobile telecommunications, comprehensive networks of antennas being installed as soon as new technologies were made available. In some sparsely populated areas mobile broadband has even replaced landlines for which maintenance costs are higher. Is relying on Internet

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publishing then contradicting with identification with nature? I think not. The presence of antennas in the landscapes and the comprehensive network coverage are not turning the lake district into an urban environment. Natural elements remain largely dominant.

The use of coordinates retrieved by means of GPS could at first appear harder to justify. Because of the availability of the technology and its increasing use in services, it has rapidly penetrated people's everyday life. This trend may be unfortunate as some authors regret that people do not anymore get lost<sup>75</sup>. By reducing uncertainty, the intensive use of GPS enabled devices is another means to compresses the “in between” that constitutes any travel and thus fosters the sensation of just getting somewhere at the expense of taking a journey. I criticized this tendency earlier by arguing that it hampers engagement with the environment. It should therefore be noted that I used my GPS only to retrieve coordinates of places in order to title videos. In the meanwhile, I kept my device off in order to save batteries as well as the feeling of wandering. GPS enabled devices are increasingly used in arts, leading some authors to write about a “deluge of mapping projects”<sup>76</sup>. In fact, maps have been included in art projects from the early days of land art (see for instance Denis Oppenheim's “Negative Board” (1968)). Unlike other art forms, land art exhibitions consisted mostly of documentation as the actual pieces were often located in remote locations. Maps helped to recontextualize these works. Maps have also often been the starting point of

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75 Will Manley (2012), *Getting Lost*, in Booklist Apr. 2012

76 Kate Palmers Albers (2010), *Cartographic postings: gps, photography, and landscape*, Afterimage, Vol. 37, Issue 5

artwork as is the case in Richard Long's "A walk by All Roads and Lanes Touching or Crossing an Imaginary Circle" (1977). In a way, the use of GPS devices by artists is just the continuation of this movement. In the case of *Looking for Risto*, precise coordinates do not constitute the heart of the work. It is rather used as a supportive element. As Kate Palmers Albers puts it, it signals "an



Illustration 26: Negative Board, 1968,  
Denis Oppenheim

engagement with the very fundamental questions of what it means to locate oneself in the landscape.”<sup>77</sup> In my view, to title video clips with coordinates of places and subtitle them with a narrative element was a way to emphasize the unique character of experiencing a given environment. Coordinates are more neutral than names of places. To give but one example, during my journey I once camped in Hirviniemi [Elk's Cape]. There are dozens places called Hirviniemi in Finland: elks take the same routes year after year to cross lakes and naturally these places got named after them. These names have nothing to do with my own experience. Only once did I see elk foot prints where they should be according to the name of the place: it

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

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was in another Hirviniemi on lake Pielinen. Coming back to the Hirviniemi I camped in this time, I would rather name it Myrskyniemi [Storm Cape] as I was stuck for an entire day on this windy cape waiting for a violent storm to pass. Another person may favour Virtaniemi [currents cape] in memory of the strong currents right in front of it or Norpanniemi [Seal's Cape] after seeing seals sunbathing on its flat rocks. Coordinates are good means to objectively designate a place and appropriate it with a personal narrative. This fitted perfectly the subject matter of the project.

In general, I consider that to engage with the natural environment, one need not be atavistic. On the contrary, I think that combining modern communication technologies and nature oriented environmental art offers room for interesting experiments. This point will be discussed in greater details in the last part of this thesis.





HERE

*N°61 11,636 E°18 29,831*

*Here, at last on Saimaa! At the harbour, a family guy seemed intrigued by the raft. Maybe he thought I was crazy. He asked me where I was heading to. When I answered I would try to reach Kuopio, he laughed. Maybe he thought I was stupid. He did not wish me good luck, told I did not know what I was talking about, packed his family on his speedboat and soon disappeared out of sight. The rage of the engine, though, was audible for a long while. I left on firm weather. It was hard at first and the friends who had driven me to the harbour must have had a good laugh as it took me a good half an hour to get out of the marina. I soon stopped to bring the first changes to the raft; I lowered the oarlocks to be in a better rowing position, An hour or two later, I finally reached open waters. There was a very mild Southern wind, perfect to test the sail and learn to handle it. I was slow but happy. What mattered is that my raft behaved well on water. It was very stable and easy to steer. Sun setted and my raft smoothly rocked on gentle waves. At sight I got the island on which I would camp for the night. A long sandy island. Oh what a bliss to be back! No more traffic at this time. Speedboats were shied away as night setted in. Just me and the lake. Hello again my dear. I missed you.*

*Ah and one detail: I had no maps. I forgot them. Well I just had to head North anyways.*



N°61 15,724 E°18 25,664

*I woke up I don't know when. I just know there was a good Southern wind I wished to catch. My back hurt of yesterday's rowing. The sky was packed with heavy clouds threatening to break apart at any time. In a hurry, I packed up, skipped breakfast and took off. As soon as I was aboard, it came. The rain. I was on and under water. Interesting amphibious situation. From a few drops, it changed into pouring rain. Inside water. Washed to the bones. It did not take long before I started to feel cold. As soon as I got across the stretch of water I sailed on, I stopped. Landing on the rocky shoreline was sporty. I hung my hammock between the two first suitable trees I found, setted my canopy up and sheltered inside my sleeping bag, eating peanuts and chocolate, making for the breakfast I had dealt for a shower. I blamed myself. Why to be always so confident? Pathologically optimist. Clouds? Rain? Waves? Arh I'm sure it'll go fine. No. It doesn't always go fine. Sometimes it's just goddam unpleasant. I'm not in a hurry in the end.*

*Rain passed, sun showed up and everything was cool again. I spent the rest of the day rowing. No more wind to lazily (sun)bath on deck. I had a bit of a hard time to find a spot where to stop for the night. Too many cottages for my taste here! I ended up on a semi-swampy cape, the kind of place which is paradise for mosquitoes and... crap. Oh yea inadvertently jerrycans, Styrofoam boards, construction wood, vodka bottles and their suite of smaller marvels escape from summer cabins and set in these wetlands. Oh so inadvertently... And well of course so close, so far: "your cottage is only a couple of hundred meters away sir but this swamp, you don't mind to crap it. You never go there anyways." And on top, food was terrible tonight. Dang!*



*N°61 11,636 E°18 29,831*

*The swamp may be crapped, I did not land here without a reason. As I followed a column of ants, wondering what they were gathering back to their nest, I found a karsikko. Only a name was carved on the trunk: Risto. Risto! I was on the right way. Of course, it's not such an uncommon name. It could be another Risto but the one I am looking for. Still, my intuition told me this was no mere chance. Who would come to this semi-swamp to carve a karsikko but him?*

*So it is light hearted that I left my camp. The wind took me easily to the next bunch of islands before it stalled. Not willing to row as much as the day before, I spent my afternoon lazying on a beautiful beach. Some hours later though, I could not resist the temptation to move further. It was good time for fishing. The sun was about to set, waters were perfectly still and I would not fail to catch my dinner in these succession of reed planted inlets and straits. And I did not. A couple of perches honourably fought for their lives before generously contributing to mine.*



N°61 19,485 E°28 18,419

*At last the real hot spells of Finnish summer! Early in the morning the sun already hit hard and there was no breeze to refresh me. I started the day having to row through a large stretch of water. Four or five kilometres maybe. I didn't know. Since I had no map. The only thing I was sure about was that it took me about three hours. I could see from far the mouth of a channel. I supposed this was where I was heading to. But what a torture! On one hand I felt angry at myself to engage in this sort of adventure, to feel pain. On the other hand, I felt happy to rely only on natural forces, my muscles and the wind. I saw speedboats rushing and I despised their pilots. I thought of Finns in general and their "taste for nature"... as long as they don't have to make do with it.*

*At last, I got off the first big lake system of the journey. I felt grateful to those who once had the brilliant idea to dig through the long peninsula bordering the north side of the lake. It spared me about a couple of days of sailing around. And I thought of Finland: a country built on dynamite. I wonder what Finns think about it. In the end dynamite is a Swedish invention... The channel I had just passed was naturally the privileged way for most of the traffic going down and up Saimaa. I saw many freighters and tugboats this day. There was almost no dwellings bordering the lake but I started to wonder to which extent this place corresponded to the "middle-of-nowhere" I like so much. In fact, it seemed I was more a lake motorway. And there would be no escape from it for a good while, at least till I would reach Pihjalavesi.*

*In fact, I was slightly worried whether I would find my way without maps. I certainly knew these waters but still... Fortunately, as I stopped on beautiful flat rocks for the evening, I noticed the sky was filled with... rocks! They were agented as constellations. Nights were still too light at this time of the year to see any star. At least I would find my way from here: spot the big cradle, the one Bear used to come down on Earth. From there, find the small cradle. And the star at the tip of its handle is the one you should never lose from sight: it will take you up North.*





N°61 25,760 E°28 17,707

*Beautiful day again. And even enough Southern wind to sail fast. After the first few days, I started to know my trade and my raft easily glided on waters. People on their dinghys or floating palaces greeted me. Some took pictures. All left me alone dealing with the large waves they left in their wake. As I got out of yet another large stretch, I was alarmed by the sound of fishing line running out of its reel. Fast, I grabbed my rod, tightened the break and started to gather the line back. I thought it must be a pike. It pulled so hard! I did not want to lose this catch and was careful not to bring it back too fast. As I was almost done, my catch suddenly jumped. It tried hard to escape. I saw beautiful stripes shining on its flanks. Not the dotted coat of a pike. It was a perch, the largest I had ever caught for sure! I finally got it aboard and put an end to its suffering. Every time I catch a fish, I feel remorse. I certainly must eat. Rice and pasta are not enough for a diet. I need fish to fill my pan. And still, I feel remorse. They are so beautiful, they swim so swiftly...*

*At last I stopped in yet another swampy no-land. There were many cabins along the strait I went up and I could only stop in a place disregarded by holiday dwellers. I still worried a drunk and angry Pappa would suddenly show up with a rifle, aim at me and shout: "Off my land! Off my swamp! You goddam hobo!" There is such thing as "every man's right" but I learnt that its acceptance varies greatly from one place to the other. Some Pappas are jealously looking after their land.*



N°61 26,113 E°28 11,014

*I took off very early in the morning. It was so nice to go on these perfectly still waters. I reached the middle of the straight and jumped. At this time, cottagers were still sleeping. None had had the idea to go for an early fishing session. At last, this place felt like it should, without jetskis, amateurs of musical soup eager to share their taste by turning their music player up, bunch of grilling masters shouting they needed another beer. Nothing of that. The only sound was the one of seagulls shouting to some imaginary intruder. So I jumped. There was almost no stream so I could stay close to my raft without much effort. I stuck my ears into the lake. Now even seagulls let me in peace. My eyes saw nothing but a completely blue screen. I was a pure sensation: one body inside the water.*

*Later that day, I stopped randomly for lunch. As I reached the shore, the boulder I aimed at swiftly changed in appearance. What seemed to be a mere piece of rock clearly turned into Bear. He looked at me, as if asking to be freed from the rock or from the petrification spell a mean spirit had cast on him. I tried my best. I collected as many blueberries I could. I stuck my feet in water and started to outline his silhouette. I was slow though. As I outlined a leg, the other would fade away. The sun did not care of my efforts and of my petrified friend. It kept turning and the shadows it cast when I had arrived were now completely gone. Bear remained only in my memory. He would not show up before the next day. I was sad. What did I do here? I was very tired. It had been a week I ate not so good food. I missed friends and Bear left me alone.*



N°61 32,162 E°28 09,835

*My plan was to land in Puumala in time to go shopping. I needed more spices to have tastier dinners. Maybe some beers also. I know that when in the woods, while I don't drink anything but water, a couple of cans are far enough to take me away. As I reached the mouth of the strait, I found it impossible to fight against the current. I did not remember it to be that strong. I had to give up and let my boat go down along the shore. It proved difficult to find a spot where to land and get to town by foot. "Yksituinen Ranta Alue". One man came towards me aboard his powerboat to ask what I was doing. I told him I could not go up the current and looked for a place to stop to walk to town. I asked if I could stay on his shore. He told me to go to the camping site, five kilometres away. Five kilometres! "And don't stop here. It's private" Fucking kind of stupid moron. As soon as he was not in sight, I stopped anyways, camouflaged my boat as best as I could under the cover of trees and headed to town through the woods. As soon as I saw a house, I ran back to the covers of trees and this way I eventually reached a road. I was so stressed to find a pissed off local by my boat once back that an herpes sprouted on my lip. I got my raft back on water and rowed away from this unwelcoming shore. I hated Puumala before this journey and now all the more. I spent the rest of the day fixing the boat. As I changed the two beams supporting the oarlocks, I found an ant colony in the joint. They had discretely settled there with their maggots and food stocks and this in a matter of days only! I was happy to take free riders aboard but worried they would make too much damage to the boat and had to get rid of them.*

*Just before going to sleep, I caught a big pike. I had seen it splashing a few meters only from my camp fire. I then could see him clearly hunting in the reeds. I cast a bait right up its nose and saw him fiercely catching it. At first, pikes look quite slow, but it's a trick. Their attacks are so sudden! I freed it. I had had dinner already and it had given me pleasure enough by letting me stalk.*



N°61 33,637 E°28 14,165

*The day before, besides shopping, I had carefully examined both shores of Puumala's strait. I had noticed that current was much stronger on the town's bank. The opposite shore consisted in a succession of inlets which made it possible to take breaks between heavy rowing sessions. The only problem is that it was consistently bordered by gardens. I did not wish to intrude anyone's privacy as I had learnt inhabitants of this small town not to be of the friendliest kind. Hence, I setted off as sun rose. This way, I could sail very close to the shore without bothering anyone's grilling session.*

*It was unsurprisingly hard but my observations had been right. I could efficiently shelter and rest between intense efforts. When I passed under Puumala's bridge, I was surprised to have succeeded. I still had to push way farther before being able to head North again in order not to be sucked back in the stream.*

*I stopped on a beautiful little island for a nap. Its shores consisted of two to five meters high cliffs. On its leeward side, a three meter wide cut appeared as a natural dock. From there, the rock rose gently. The top of the island was rather flat and yet surrounded buy large boulders so to offer a perfect shelter. The island was planted with massive pine trees and there was no sign of camp fire and no garbage to be found as it is usual on nice camping spots. I was surprised never to have noticed this place in my previous trips. Maybe it's too close to Puumala. Some three kilometres maybe. But I remember now and will certainly return.*

*I finished the day further north on another deserted island. It was a strange one. It bore many still standing dead pine trees. On one side, a boulder field seemed to serve as a shelter for many beasts. Clear paths came out of the various holes to be found in between the rock. As I reached the higher part of the island, I found a very odd looking pine tree. Still standing on the windiest spot of the island. All of its needle had long fallen down. But it bore dozens of pine cones, hanging down its branches on garlands. Maybe I hallucinated or maybe I started to see the land*



*otherwise. This happens when you don't sleep much, don't talk much. You start to see very strange things.*



N°61 36,080 E°28 21,909

*In the morning garlands still hung from the dead pine tree. Strange. Actually everything was strange that day. It rained but the ground seemed not to get moisture. Maybe it was because of the very strong wind instantly drying up rocks and bushes between showers. I felt odd as well. I did not sleep much again. I did not dare to leave the island. Too much wind. Even seagulls did not dare a fly. Short before dawn they eventually took off and so did I. Gusts seemed to be slightly less violent. There was no one on the lake and I wondered whether I was the only one not to be shied away. It was not too bad in the end and with wind in the back, I was fast. Waves were big enough to get over the raft, even from the back. It moved a lot and I started to be slightly worried. At the mouth of yet another strait, I cut through the cape. Fast. Too fast. I suddenly stopped. The gloomy sound of the metal barrel hitting shallows scared me badly. I could not check whether it had broken. I tried to get away from the rocks as best as I could. It was difficult. I eventually got back to deeper waters and, despite to very good wind, decided to stop. I spotted a small island seemingly populated only by seagulls. It would be mine for the night. I was glad to stop. I had made it through the storm on my bunch of junk. Proud! As I landed, I found a sort of necklace. Attached to it, a white feather and a black one. A pike bone and the one of a small mammal, probably a hare. Strange, unexpected. Maybe it was a reward for getting off the storm, a talisman. These things don't just appear by chance I believe. I thought it would protect me from further encounters with shallows. In a sense, if I had the spirits of the Gull and the Crow, I'd be safe on waters and in forest. With the spirits of the pike and the hare, no harm would be done to me underwater or underground. All was for the best.*



N°61 36,947 E°28 30,407

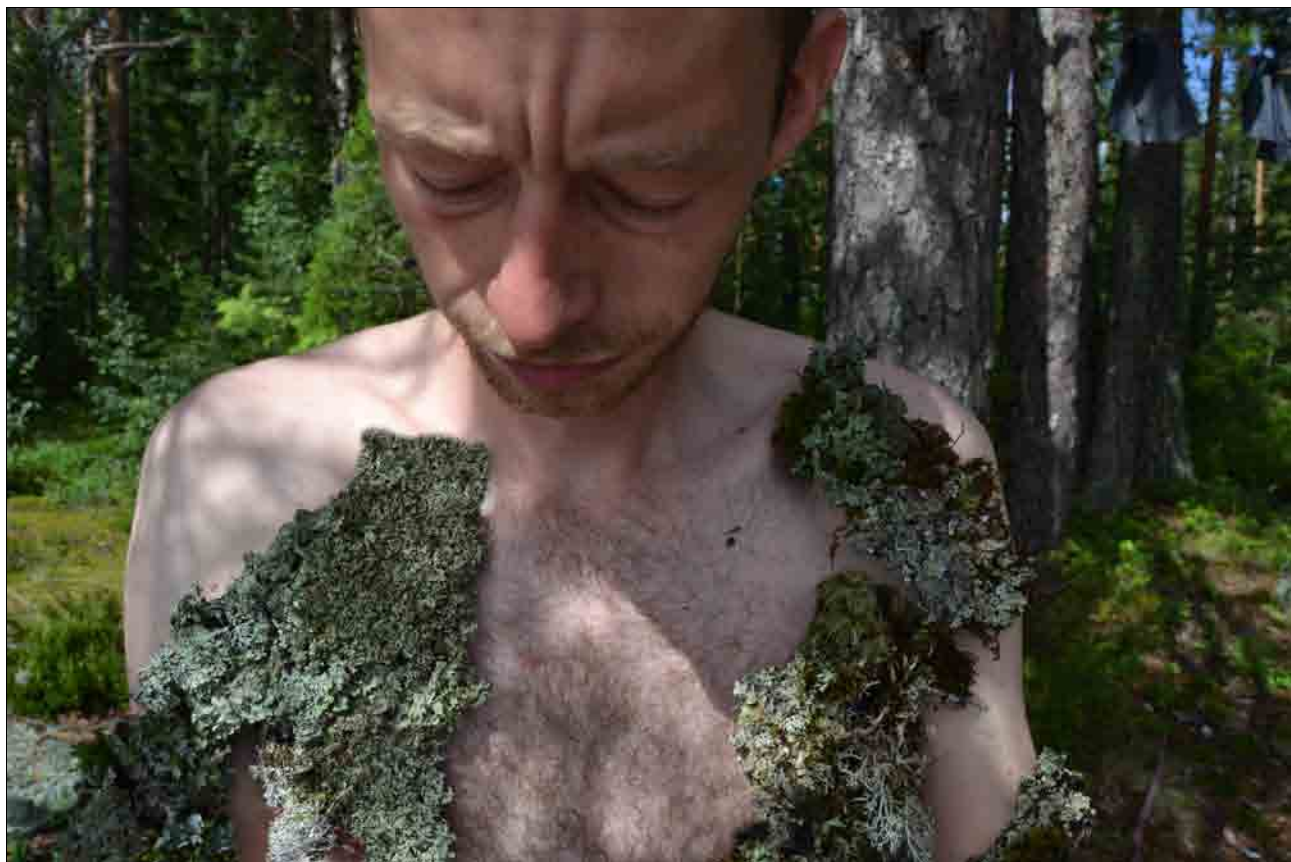
*Sun! At last I could wash and bath. It was time to get rid of the layer of dirt on my skin... and of the typical forest perfume: a fine mix of smoke, sweat and dirt. It's not disgusting. One gets used to. Only is it pleasant to slough its skin as it wears out. Before leaving, as I explored the large rocks on which gulls nested, I spotted a two-headed fledgeling. I had not taken any drug for weeks. I had not drunken. I had not tried unknown herbs or mushrooms. Yet this young bird had two heads as sure as I had only one. Or did I? I had not seen myself in a mirror for a good while. Things are not always as they seem. Maybe it was this talisman playing tricks. Well, a two-headed fledgeling is as harmless as a one headed one. What difference does it make in the end? People are just not used to so they get anxious. I wouldn't. In a sense it was a good sign. I knew this Risto not to be completely rational. Maybe it would take two headed birds to spot him as an extra pair of eyes would not be superfluous. Neither would be an extra head.*

*The talisman did not help much with the wind. After I departed, it took only a few minutes before it blew in violent gusts. From sides. All the joints of the raft gloomily creaked and I feared to soon be swimming north instead of sailing. It's not bad maybe to swim. Still, I'd rather go by boat. I may have had two heads, I could clearly see that nor my legs neither my arms had yet turned into fins. Talking about swimming creatures, I also spotted a mermaid, a moustached mermaid. Or maybe it was a seal but I like to think it was a mermaid. This added to the two-headed fledgeling, started to seriously get me worried about the intentions of Poseidon or his Finnish counterpart. I remembered that Vikings had a dragon at the bow of their longships, supposedly to protect them from angered gods. I stopped and after some wandering on the shore, I found a perfectly suitable dragon for my vessel. He even wore a large pink diamond. With no doubt this would protect me for the rest of the trip!*



*N°61 41,709 E°28 31,286*

*First contacts with the outside world. Or to be more precise, with the world outside of myself. It is a strange feeling to be suddenly reminded that there is another reality, that mermaids and dragons are not everybody's routine. In any case, a short communication over the phone does not change much. As soon as it's over, it seems to have been a sort of hallucination or a dream. The truth is that I am still on my raft and on the Saimaa. Today I passed the strait opening to Pihjalavesi. The current was once again rather strong but it all went fine. Besides, not much has happened. I would almost miss the stormy and exciting weather of the last few days. Instead, I just got fine and annoying rain. The whole day long or almost. And it seems I start to rot. Or to turn into the forest. Patches of moss and lichens suddenly appeared all around my body, sprouted as mushrooms after the first autumn rain. It tells a lot about this non-thing: summer.*





N°61 45,179 E°28 31,010

*A shitty day again. As there as been four others this week. It rained from morning till evening. I tried to keep myself busy with cleaning some birch bark sheets and carving some wood. I stayed on a small devastated island. Half of the trees, some of respectable size, were down. As down as my mood. At the killing-time game, I would have appreciated to start with killing myself but I did not even have tobacco to indulge myself at least this little civilised and deadly pleasure: a cigarette on a rainy day. In fact the clouds were so heavy that it looked like Satan himself was on his way. If Sheitan's tail was to flap the air in a close future, I'd better be prepared. I thus decided to carve a pair of horns for myself as I thought they would soon be in fashion down here.*

*In the meanwhile, I did not go anywhere. I was stuck on a stupid island under stupid rain just because I once had the stupid idea to look for Mister R, supposedly somewhere in the direction of Kuopio. But why? All I have heard about Kuopio is that it's quite like Jyväskylä. I know the latter enough not to be willing to visit its sister-town. Damn! I come from a warm, sunny and pleasant country. Why in hell am I again spending my summer in this cold, moisturised and anonymous corner of Europe?*





N°61 45,802 E°28 34,013

*Arhhhhh! Will this autumn prequel eventually cease? Only good news is that I got rid of these moss patches that started to grow on my body. A mosquito liquor did the trick. It was pretty time consuming to hunt for enough of them and it tasted really bad but in the morning at least did I get rid of the rot.*

*Besides, Pihjalavesi is so beautiful. I think it's really my favourite part of the Saimaa. And it's so deserted! No towns of course and even very few cottages and boats. Well of course, all this would be better under the sun... I spent most of the day rowing because of adverse winds. My idea was to reach Savonlinna in the morning. All in all, I think I spent almost twenty hours rowing. Towards the end, I was so exhausted I started to cry. The lake was completely dark and I could barely say whether I moved forward or not. All this was too hard. As the night went on, I was more and more convinced that I would give it all up. I started to imagine strategies on how I could cheat people, go back home and pretend I would have found Risto when I would have actually not even seen his shadow. In the end I was alone on my boat. I could have as well gone to Caribbean for a month and come back pretending to have had thrilling time in the woods. When you are alone, the distinction between fiction and reality really does not make any sense. Sometimes, I actually wonder why people don't come up with more exciting adventures and keep getting themselves and others bored with routines. I would always prefer a completely untrue good story over hard and boring facts.*

*In any case, there was no escape. I was in the middle of a large lake cursing myself and all the idiots of my kind. The only way out was forward. I stopped when the sun rose. I found an islet or to be more precise, a large rock, on which stood no more than three trees and which was squatted by about a million two hundred and three seagulls. I had to beg them to let me sleep with them. I had no strength to go further and really had to sleep a bit. They miraculously answered my call and let me walk to the trees without any serious white bombing.*



N°61 49,678 E°28 51,348

*The seagulls barely let me sleep. Maybe one hour or two. I quickly packed my hammock and took off. I thought I was fed up with the rain. I thought it was pointless to continue without being able to post videos online. I thought I did not even have a map of Haukivesi, just North of Savonlinna. I thought I was stupid... And this strange dream that I had despite the seagulls' racket. I was hanging around flat rocks eating moss and groaning. Or I don't know. Maybe it was me. Maybe not. I could not see my own face, hidden behind a mask. But the character, if not myself, at least looked familiar to me. In any case it was strange. I don't know whether it was because of the seagulls or the tiredness.*

*I eventually reached Savonlinna and first stopped at the harbour to go shopping. The town barely woke up and was silent. I got a coffee and cigarettes, waiting for the shops to open. When I got back to the raft, a man was loading his boat with logs and planks. I asked for the time and we started a conversation. He was very impressed. As I asked if the hardware shop would open at all, he answered no but enquired what I needed. Just a few nails to fix my bench. He told me he would go to unload his stuff at his cabin and come back with some. I could go to shop in the meanwhile. When he came back, we discussed the best way to reach the other side of the town. He told me the West strait would be easier than the one rounding the fortress. I was very surprised as I remembered it to be very streamy. We chatted further: about seals, fishing, life in the woods. He ended up offering me a nice fishing plug. As he left, he repeated he was so glad to have met a foreigner able to speak Finnish and caring for nature... Arh, maybe I was a bit Finnish myself in the end. I eventually got on my raft and moved up towards the strait. As I eventually reached it, I was first glad to notice my mast was not too tall to go under the bridge. But I failed. I tried several times and failed again. I tried to hitch-hike for a pull but boaters did not understand and only greeted me happily. I went knocking on the door of the closest house to ask to use a pedestrian tunnel. It would have implied lots of unmounting, huge mess. In any case, nobody opened and I did not want to be*

*found messing around someone's garden. I gave up, parked my boat, set up my canopy and eventually got some sleep... by the main road, with hug tugboats cracking in the waves next to me. Not very charming. And yet, my hammock hung from some of the biggest trees I have ever seen in Finland: on a cliff, in a city: a spot safe from chainsaws. The plan was to go back to Haukivesi at night. Maybe try the way around the fortress. Inch Allah'!*



N°61 51,483 E°28 53,240

*I left as the night was setting in, heading to the other side of town in order to try to pass around the fortress. In vein. A kilometre or so from the mouth of the strait, I could already feel the current. Hopeless. And I was still exhausted. As to finish to convince me of the impossibility to reach the other side of town, it started to rain. It had been a long time... In these conditions, I decided to give up and rather row down to Pihjalavesi. As soon as I got off sight of the town, I landed and installed my camp for a well deserved sleep.*

*I woke up some hours later noticing my sleeping bag was wet. I first thought I was maybe too old to wet my bed. As I got my arms out of the bag I understood. My hammock was soaked with water! I decided to get out of my sadly ruined cocoon. It had poured rain the whole night. All I hoped now was for at least one hour of sun to get reorganized, dry my couch up. Surprisingly, I was in a very good mood. It could be worse: except from my hands, I wasn't cold. And even the mosquitoes seemed to have decided to give me a break and had disappeared from my shelter.*

*As the sun eventually broke through the layer of clouds, I took off to move just a bit forward. There was not many people on the lake. In fact, I was completely alone. The image was quite dramatic: a lost raft sailing on a lake of black ink with rays of sun hitting scattered islands. After a short while, as it seemed rain would start again, I decided it was time to stop. I got closer to the shore. There seemed to be someone fishing from the cape I headed to. He did not move much. I landed a hundred meters away from him and decided to go to introduce myself. I would not mind some company.*

*It was him! Risto! How glad I was! In the end, it was all for good that I could not push further to Haukivesi. He waited for me here. Maybe he knew I would come anyways. I got closer to him. I greeted him. He did not react. Or so little. But that was him for sure. I recognized his face: the same as the one I had seen in a dream only a few days before. Ah what a nice encounter. It was about time.*



*N°61 51,151 E°28 53,907*

*Now Risto is with me. How nice it is to have some company. We moved just a little. Now that we are together, I don't see much point in covering long distances. And in any case, the weather is still quite bad so no reason to be on water for too long. We spent most of the day on land, picking mushrooms and berries. There are so many chanterelles it's insane! And this early in the season. It's such a pleasure to have dinners: I fill the pan directly from the ground and then cook them for a few minutes with just a bit of garlic, salt and pepper. Delicious on fresh own-made bread.*

*We also took time to go fishing. It was nice to lazily row around fields of reeds, trying to catch a couple of perches. I started to think that it was in fact strange how much we are alike. We seem to like exactly the same things: a bit of fishing, a bit of mushroom picking, large fires when night sets in, a lot of lazying on the shore. Risto isn't reacting too much on my comments. He is of the typical Finnish kind. It does not bother me much. No word is needed to enjoy being in the woods. And in any case, I know he is on the same level. So much that it feels we have grown together or followed similar paths. So similar.*





N°61 49,655 E°28 53,240

*Things seem to have taken a wrong direction since yesterday. I already wrote that Risto and I are so similar that it's unsettling. At last he opened his mouth and what came out is not of the nicest kind. He claims I should try to get a life of my own instead of trying to be him. He claims I will never be a Finn, that all my efforts are in vain. I tried to explain him that I don't try to be Finnish, that I am just myself and that's only a chance that we are so alike. But he does not want to give up his idea. He is condescending. As if him, as a Finn, he could legitimately enjoy the woods, be an expert in mushroom and berry cooking, know all the possible ways to catch pikes and perches while I would just hopelessly emulate HIS Finnishness. This is so wrong! It reminds me so many other episodes: almost ten years ago a bunch of acquaintances heated up a sauna over 100°C and challenged me to go there with them, as if they would be the chosen people with a specific metabolism making it possible for them to take it more than others. I wondered if they had ever heard of hammams, banyas and sweat lodges. It reminded me of this grandpa who refused me to build my own fire and insisted in showing me the right way, as if Finland was the only place where people build a fires in the wild. Arh poor Risto, you are not quite different from them. Our quarrel went on the whole day... until I told him to get lost, to disappear; until I told him it was not so much me who was him but him who was me. Poor strawman. He did not realise he was just a symbol, a puppet.*



N°61 49,771 E°28 55,150

*Things are going from bad to worse. As we took off in the morning to get to the next island, we did not talk. He looked at me with so much despise, so much in fact that I decided to get rid of him. It was useless to try to convince him longer that he was me, that there was not such thing as an authentic forest man, that this was just an image, that he emanated from me, not from some sacred Finnish tradition. As soon as we landed disappeared from sight, running to the forest. I did not like that and I was quite convinced he was preparing some nasty trick. He could not be far as the island was not that large.*

*I decided to hunt him down and get rid of him. How wrong was I from the beginning! I thought I needed him as a companion. I realise he is just good at negating complexity, nuances, multiplicity. Luckily, there were enough materials in the surroundings to build a weapon. A machine gun! I figured that sharp spruce cones would be more than enough to take a strawman down. I went on furbishing my weapon as it, once again, poured rain. As soon as the weather got better, I went to the woods, looking for my alter ego. I shouted. I yelled. I screamed. Where are you Risto!? There can be only one.*





N°61 48,830 E°28 54,726

*One more day of fighting schizophrenia. I tried to keep calm. I went swimming despite the air being chilly. I decided to collect berries to kill time. A large piece of forest had recently been chopped down. In fact, it was most of the island. Only shore lines, rocky areas and swamps had been left untouched. I always found this practice ambiguous. Not to cut trees bordering the shore is supposed to prevent erosion. To me it looks like a hypocritical prudish gesture, as if forestry companies had to hide their systematic destruction of the forest behind a thin curtain of trees. The place I was in had been cut down recently. The grounds still bore the deep marks of forestry engines turning into as many ponds. In fact, it was the whole area which seemed to have been ploughed by a giant razorback. Many trees had been cut down but left on site for a reason I could not figure. It gave to the whole enterprise an even more gratuitous aspect. I could not refrain to compare this battlefield with areas in which it was not machines but the wind which took trees down. It does also make impressive damages. But the grounds remain largely untouched. Lower vegetation in fact benefits from it as more light penetrates the underwood. By contrast, this place looked desolated. The only positive side was that still standing blueberry bushes bore truly enormous fruits and made the harvest easier. Picking berries calmed me down a bit. It is a nice meditative activity.*

*After having filled my kettle enough, I went back to my camp and was surprised to see Risto resting on a bench. I would not miss him this time. I quickly carved a javelin and hit him at the first try. This was not to be mean. In the end, he was only an emanation of myself, a puppet. Puppets do not suffer.*

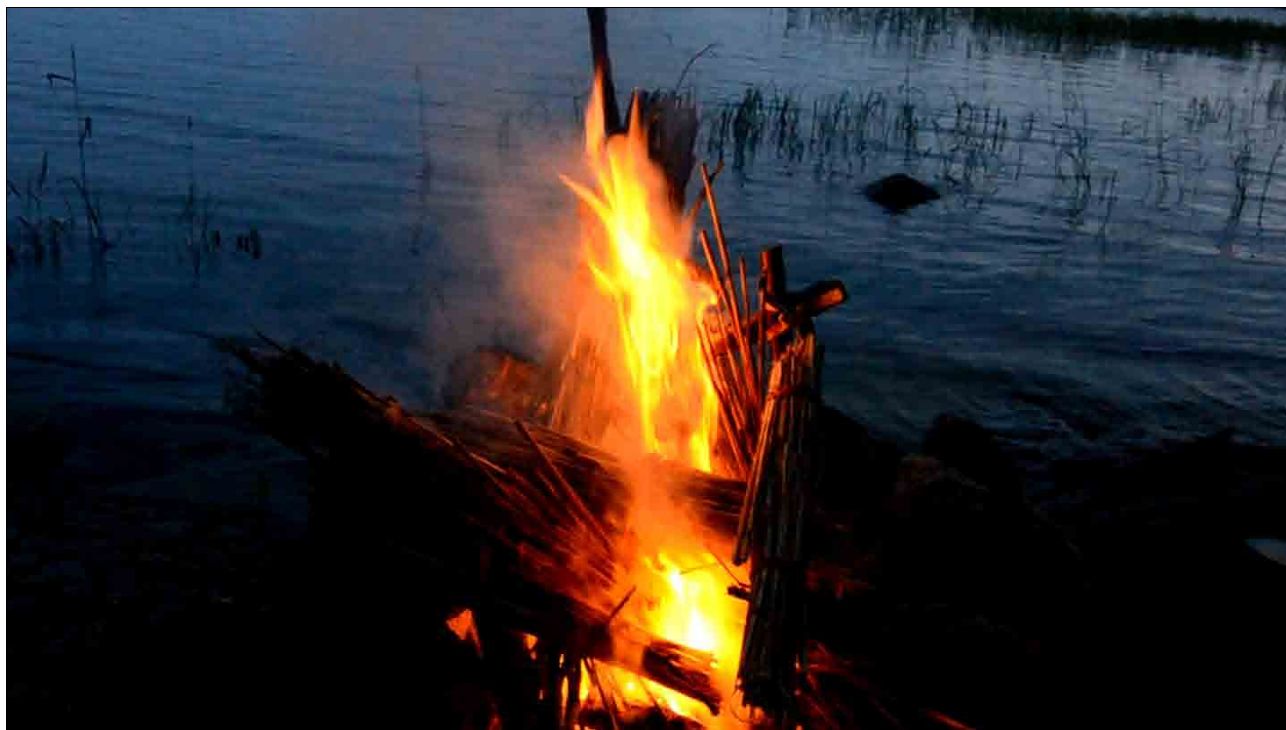


*N°61 50,916 E°28 53,660*

*Last day. I was sad. Although it had rained for most of the journey, I had eventually adjusted back to this life of wandering. It is so pleasant not to have a set destination, not to have obligations, not to have to confront with others. On the lakes I am free. I need to wake up, find food, enjoy. A relaxing simplicity. And Pihjalavesi is so beautiful. I could stay for hours laying on a flat rock, just looking at the landscape, smelling the forest, listening to families of duck cruising along the shore, schools of fry splashing on the surface when hunted by a perch. I think it is the only place where I can feel completely at ease, where I can just be and forget myself for a while. I don't need a strawman for that. I don't need anybody in fact. I need no justification or explanation.*

*But all this is over for now. To celebrate, I built a large fire, just by the water, so much that waves lapped against the stone of the hearth. And there went Risto. Burnt. I was happy.*







WHERE TO



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As often in environmental art, artistic work must be prolonged beyond the production of the actual piece. In the case of the current project, this is to acknowledge the need for further artistic input after the journey. In some sense, I have arrived somewhere only to wonder where to go next. Most of the work was done in remote locations, inaccessible to a potential audience. Hence, documentation appears to be crucial. This does not go without raising questions regarding the nature of the work of art. Indeed, if one encounters art only through document, what is in the end the actual work, the document or the original object of documentation? One way to tackle the issue is to consider art not as a product, an object, but as a process.

In this last part, we will first examine some of the shortcomings of the project. If it is a process, it must be possible to reflect on it. The process nature of the project is also informed by the narrative strategy I adopted. I have already written about this dimension in the first part of the thesis. Here we will concentrate on its evolving nature. There was no predetermined script. Instead, the story became the subject of local conditions and daily events. After this, we will examine various options available to document environmental art. We will briefly browse through the way artists of the 1960s and 1970s documented their work, particularly photography, before proposing alternative modes of confrontation.

## 1. Art as a process

As an art project, *Looking for Risto* concentrates on the creative process rather than on delivering of an art object. Although I built a raft, it carries little meaning outside the context of the journey. Emphasizing the process rather than the end product is a lasting trend among environmental artists. More than often, preparatory work and subsequent documentation are put forward. Even sculptural works which come closest to traditional art objects are often temporary and decay. To emphasize the process rather than producing an autonomous art object is not a neutral approach. To mention but one implication, it runs against traditional commodification of art. In the context of this thesis, we will leave this aspect largely aside. Instead, I would like to start with examining, *a posteriori*, some of the practical shortcomings of my work. In some sense, it is artificial to consider *Looking for Risto* in isolation from earlier experiences and projects that will follow. To acknowledge the ways in which it could have been done better is to look at it in the greater context of my art practice. Beyond practical issues, the choice to rely on a narrative and the way this was done is another aspect through which the process nature of my work clearly appears.

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### **Some shortcomings**

From the beginning of the project, my intention was to go for a journey on a raft I would build by myself. I naturally started with looking for various sources, mostly outside the art world, in order to make my mind about the type of boat I wanted to build. From there and the original sketches, I had to repeatedly modify the boat. One challenge was to bring weight down. This led me to build a shorter raft than originally planned, to reduce the surface of hard floors and eventually replace the front metallic drum with eight plastic jerrycans. Besides, the two trials I made on water in Helsinki forced me to build two lateral stabilizers and to make stronger oars. During the trip, a few fixes and modifications were also needed so that the raft I came back with did not look exactly like the one I left with. These changes were documented and published online. One idea behind was to contribute back to the collective knowledge I had gathered around various internet forums. Perchance someone will someday find useful information in the blog posts I published.

No matter how many times I had to modify the raft, it does not appear as a true shortcoming: the design of the boat I eventually took off with is not far from the original design. This is not the case of another idea which I pursued from the start of the project. I originally intended to travel by means of a power-kite. My main motive was that of fantasy: kites are somewhat magical artefacts with loads of legends associated to them, particularly in the East. Besides, and maybe more importantly, kites are fun! Although they have serious

implementations they first are big toys. In any case, I spent several months designing a large kite with the help of a specialised software. The sowing and construction of inflated ribs was as lengthy. Last, I drew a map of the entire lake district on the kite's wing. Unfortunately, all these efforts were not enough. One week prior to departure, I was still tweaking it. Although it somewhat flew, I realised I would be unable to launch it alone as a power-kite should be. This convinced me to completely revise my plan and give up the kite idea. Instead, I installed a mast on the raft and sew a sail. On one hand, I felt highly frustrated not to have succeeded and to be forced to give up. On the other hand, I realised that the experience gained through the process is not lost. I will with no doubt build upon it in future projects. A posteriori, I also realise that a kite was not adapted to sailing in the lake district. To slalom between islands and constantly change direction makes it hard to enjoy back wind on long distances. Unlike kites, sails are more versatile in so that they make it possible to take advantage of side winds. Besides, they demand less handling efforts.

Another aspect which was revised was the route I took. The original plan was to aim to Kuopio, the northernmost reach of Saimaa. Had I hurried, I may have got there. I did not. During the summer 2012, waters of the Saimaa were almost a meter higher than average. One consequence was stronger currents in the few straits I had to go through. In Savonlinna, my many attempts to go against the current failed. I had to revise my plan and to remain on Pihjalavesi instead of pushing farther North. This change in plans was not significant, as

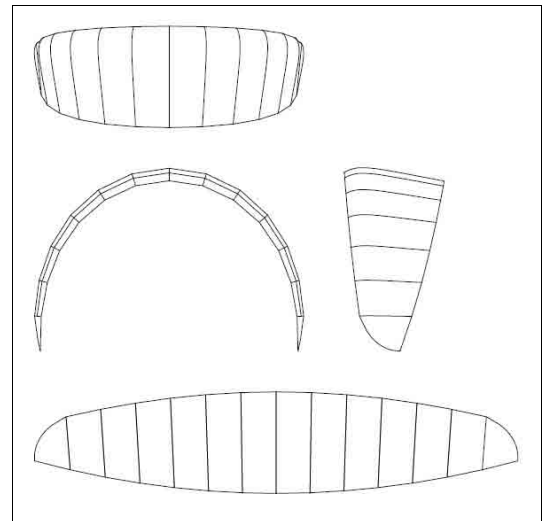




*Illustration 27: Cutting kite parts*



*Illustration 28: Self-made kite bladders*



*Illustration 29: Computer generated kite profiles*

eventually, it's not the destination that counts, it's the journey. With a lighter boat, or in another year, I would have been able to pass the strait. I did not.

Last, for the purpose of documentation and publishing, I travelled with a smart phone capable of capturing high definition pictures and videos and access Internet for online publication. My only power source was a solar panel. While the first week was rather sunny and made it possible to charge the phone everyday, weather conditions gradually degraded and the last ten days were very rainy, to the point that there was not even a few hours of sun for the solar panel to harvest. I naturally ran out of battery and was unable to publish videos. I then had to shoot with a regular camera and publish the video clips

after the trip. Power shortage, also deprived me of the only maps I had, as these were stored on my phone. This last aspect was not that important as I somewhat knew the area I was sailing in. Although I did not always know exactly where I was, I had a rough idea of my position, which is enough. The inability to publish videos was a more serious shortcoming as I had put this aspect forwards from the start of the project. One has to make do however. If art



Illustration 30: My phone and my solar charger hopelessly looking for sun

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is to be a secured process, one should better stay in his studio, sheltered from weather hazards, with a reliable power supply and a hardware shop to rush to any time needed.

A last aspect I would do differently, would I engage in a similar project has to do with promotion. In the present case, promotion prior to departure was done exclusively on various Internet platforms through already available pages such as my Facebook artist page, my website or my Vimeo account. This strategy fitted well the video format I had opted for publishing my work. These videos were made available online. However, this was also limiting in so that I reached an audience who was already familiar with my work. While I was on the lake, dozens of people cruising on their boats took pictures of me. This would have been a perfect opportunity to enlarge the audience of my different websites, for instance by writing down their URLs on the sail. In Savonlinna, my raft attracted a lot of attention when moored in the harbour. A man with who I had a long conversation eventually called a journalist from the local paper to come and interview me. It was Sunday, the journalist promised to come but never showed up. Retrospectively, I realise I could have advertised my project to the various papers of localities I crossed on my way. I would certainly have gained press coverage and potentially attracted attention on my art work. One difficulty of course was the inability to tell in advance the date at which I would be in the said localities. It remains that in the future I should pay greater attention to this aspect. Although art is sometimes made in remote locations without any direct audience, it eventually aims at being published.

**An evolving narrative**

Besides practical issues discussed above, the process nature of the project is also reflected in its performance dimension. It was clear from the beginning that some fictional elements would be included. In the end, Risto does not have any social security number, if this is to be a criteria of existence. In other spheres but the legal one, he does however exist. For instance, he has a Facebook account. Or more exactly, there is a digital avatar who is named after him. It remains that he is originally a fictional character.

The overall story behind the journey was drafted relatively early in during the planning phase. I knew I would go on the lakes to look for him and that I would probably find him at some point. The details remained fuzzy. I made a list of possible episodes, or daily performances which would be included in the greater narrative. Prior to departure, I had accumulated about forty ideas of performances ranging from crawling naked out of a swamp to shadow theatre. They were not ordered in any ways and I did not take the list with me for the journey.

Imagining and listing possible performances was an interesting exercise but I also knew from the beginning that performing in the woods is so contingent that the plan would be revised en route. The first reason for not relying on a detailed script is the need to take in consideration the local environment. Places are more or less suited to selected performances or installations. To give but one example, I hoped to do some blueberry rock paintings. I had

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previous experience and wanted to repeat it. Naturally, this is impossible without blueberries and a cliff. The weather was another factor to take in consideration. I have mentioned earlier that I had produced crafts in particular conditions, namely heavy rains obliging me to stay confined under my canopy and rely on materials found in the immediate vicinity. The story was then bent to fit these specific conditions.

More importantly, to travel is not only to engage with environment but also a mental journey. We have seen that environments, beyond their physical attributes bear cultural meaning. A certain landscape conveys different impressions according to our respective experiences and cultural background. This is the more obvious side of the mental journey. The less obvious one has to do with the gradual alteration of consciousness. Here is what I wrote on the topic after a two months long trip in 2010:

“As time passed, the line between reality and imagination got thinner. [...] When alone, reality itself becomes meaningless. Indeed, without anyone on whom to reflect the world as we perceive it, objectivity is vain and one is left with his own subjective interpretation of time and environment.

[...] Hallucinations started after about a month. It was not so much about visual wonders. Rather, I tended to lose the sense of my self as I have known it for 25 years. As I woke up, stories I may have told to myself while dreaming went on. One night, as I had taken off after dawn, I became very afraid to be caught by a witch who inhabited the forest which bordered the lake I paddled on. Once I eventually landed, I hurried to build a fire in order to keep the spirit away. I could not take away from my mind the conviction that I'd be eaten up by the forest.

Another time, I felt into absolute bliss at the sight of a women dressed in white and walking on the lake (?!). Her head was crowned with long blond hair and despite heavy clouds cruising above, a ray of light fell upon her. The vision was absolutely wonderful. Up to this day, I am convinced I was not hallucinating. Or if I were, there was absolutely no way for me not to believe what my eyes saw. The vision faded when a violent storm rushed onto me and forced me to engage in intense paddling to reach the shore as fast as possible.”<sup>78</sup>

The hallucinations described above are, from my experience, quite close to those caused by some psychoactive drugs. Loneliness and deprivation of sleep are powerful psychotropics. For the present project, I hoped to reach the same state of mind. It did not happen, at least to the point I experienced at other times. The main reason lies in the shorter time spent alone. It takes time to let go of rational thinking we are conditioned for. In the matter, I consider psychoactive drugs as shortcuts, enabling one to bend reality in a matter of minute instead of weeks. Despite the fact that I remained psychologically sane for most of the

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<sup>78</sup> Tristan Hamel, op.cit.

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trip, I still went through mentally intense moments, overwhelmed by waves of hysteric happiness or on the contrary intense depression, bursting in tears with no apparent reason. I have conversed with seagulls, trying to explain them I would only stay on their island for a few hours, that I was in no way intending to steal their eggs. Another symptom of mental shift is compulsive counting of oar strokes, berries picked, steps, waves, axe strokes and so on. Usually, this happens to me only when doing intense physical activity. In the woods, it comes gradually up to the point to occupy a good share of my time. In these moments, this is not that I do not perceive the environment anymore. Only do I stop to verbalize it. Hence, although I was not subject to any serious hallucinations, the mental shift had to be taken into account in the performative part of the project. It is not possible to foresee states of mind. They have to be dealt with at the time of the performance. To follow a detailed script would be to miss the rare opportunity to work in an altered version of reality which is made possible by long periods of loneliness. From there, the process nature of Looking for Risto, clearly appears again.

## 2. Documenting art

”Who would give a tinker's damn for a description of a sunset that he hadn't seen?  
Damn it, it's like kissing a pretty girl by proxy”<sup>79</sup>

By using perishable materials and making art in remote locations environmental artists need to rely on documentation to publish their work, the audience then most often encountering art works indirectly, in a mediated form. This raises a series of issues and difficulties. One of them is to determine what in this context is the art work. Is it the sculpture made in the desert only directly experienced by only a few people or is it the photographs exhibited in galleries and published in books? Our main argument here is that in the case of environmental art, original art works and documents cannot be considered in isolation from each other. After a rapid examination of the rise of documentation in environmental art, I will explain why documents can in fact be considered to be part of the art work. This is once more to consider art as a process rather than an autonomous object. This is with this approach in mind that I have designed the various ways to publicize *Looking for Risto*.

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<sup>79</sup> Samuel A Jones to W Hosmer, 16.4.1903, cited in Lawrence Buell, op.cit., p.84



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### **Documentation in environmental art**

In anthologies, environmental art and land art are often treated as parts of a single movement which started back in the 1960s, mostly in America. In spite of the significant differences between the works of the various artists included in the field, in this chapter we will use “environmental art” as a generic to refer to this movement. It is not rare that the artists themselves reject the label as a whole. Hence Fulton only accepts “walk art” as a categorization of his own practice<sup>80</sup>. It remains that a few trends common to many artists usually labelled as land or environmental artists can be identified. One of them is the rejection of the gallery as a normative space. This stance is particularly striking in the work of land artists of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the reason behind the move out of the gallery was to criticize art as a commodity. In 1970, Michael Heizer declared that “one aspect of earth orientation is that the works circumvent to the galleries and the artists has no sense of the commercial and the utilitarian. [...] One of the implications of Earth Art might be to remove completely the commodity status of a work of art.”<sup>81</sup> It should be noted however that their criticism is of an ambiguous nature. While they rejected the conventions of the art world of which the “white cube” is the archetype, they were for most of them New Yorkers with educational background in art academies and their works were made possible by the support

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80 Hamish Fulton, op.cit.

81 Cited in Jeffrey Kastner (2011), *Land and Environmental Art*, London, UK: Phaidon Press, p.30

of generous patrons or gallerists. Still, the move out of the gallery to do art in remote places, sometimes with rapidly decaying materials rose interesting issues on how to publicize these works. This rose a series of questions about documentation and the relationship of the latter with the art work.

Unlike traditional art forms, such as sculptures or paintings, environmental art pieces often distinguish themselves by their non-commodity nature. This is particularly obvious with the site-specific monumental art works of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Michael Heizer and Walter De Maria got recognition with art pieces produced in Western deserts of America which, because of their very nature, could not be considered independently of the environment. More importantly, they relied heavily on documentation in order to reach any audience. Because of the remoteness of the location in where they were produced, documentation was often the only means by which anyone could see these works. This held even truer with temporary works soon disappearing because of the decaying nature of the materials. To give up the idea of art as an autonomous object to be displayed in a neutral context was a radical move away from modernist conventions. The 1968 “Earthwork” exhibition in New York, probably served as a milestone for the movement. The works displayed were large-scale outdoor works and “posed an explicit challenge to the conventional notion of exhibition and sales, in that they were either too large or too unwieldy to be collected; most were represented by photographs, further emphasizing their resistance to

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acquisition.”<sup>82</sup> The use of documentation was not only unsettling the idea of art market but also posed new challenges to the aesthetic appreciation to works. Brian Wallis perfectly coins this issue:

“This not only frustrated conventional market expectations in the gallery, but established a strange sense of absence, even loss, and posed a peculiarly disorienting problem about what constituted the 'real' work of art. As critic Craig Owens later noted, the key shift marked by these works was 'a radical dislocation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer of physical position, but of *mode* (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art”<sup>83</sup>

I would add installations to the modes of confrontation mentioned above as it has been regularly used by artists to evoke their works in spaces where the original would not fit. In fact, in the case of installations, the problem of knowing what constitutes the work of art and what is mere documentation becomes even harder to solve. Indeed, the idea of documentation evokes qualities such as objective, neutral, transparent. These qualities fit better other modes of confrontation and before any, photography. I consider it is not mere chance that these have been traditionally favoured by artists.

To start with, an obvious but often disregarded fact that facilitated the adoption of photography as the most common way to document environmental art is the availability and

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82 Ibid., p.33

83 Ibid. p.24

ease of use of cameras. To give an obvious example, the documentation of walks by Richard Long and Amish Fulton are largely constructed on the availability of cameras. It is doubtful artists would have engaged in such a practice a few decades earlier when photography still needed heavy equipment. More generally, photography has for long appeared as the most transparent mode of documentation. As Susan Sontag puts it, “a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture.”<sup>84</sup>. In this way, photographs are better means of documentation than writings or sketches which “can never be other than narrow selective interpretation, [whereas] a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selected transparency.”<sup>85</sup>. In the case of land art monumental sculptures, aerial photography was also used intensively in order to make it possible for the audience to embrace the whole work at once, which is impossible from the ground level. It is interesting to note though that this was not always the artist's first intention. Heizer's “Double Negative” (1969) was first displayed as a set of panoramic pictures from the ground level.

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<sup>84</sup>Susan Sontag (1979), *On photography*, London: Penguin Books, p.5

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.6

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### **Documentation as part of the art practice**

The view according to which photography is best suited for the documentation of environmental art is challenged by the obstinate use of other forms by artists themselves. In addition to photographs, we have already mentioned that Fulton has developed a singular way to document his works by using words or short sentences. Artists such as Denis Oppenheim and Richard Long repeatedly used maps in addition of photographs. Goldsworthy and Long regularly set installations in gallery spaces. The works of Jussi Kivi presented in the first part of this essay include many drawings and sketches done during his expeditions. Countless artists complement their works with essays, articles and statements. These examples are as many indications that photographs as supposedly objective visual representations of physical works do not suffice.

Rather than the failure of photography to be sufficient documentation, the obstinate use of other forms of documentations by artist indicates that photographs are not any more transparent than other mediums. Although they are often seen as a slice of reality, one should remember that there is always a photographer behind the objective, and that this subjectivity is expressed on the pictures. In fact, “photograph are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.”<sup>86</sup> This subjectivity was often used by environmental artists.

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86 Ibid. p.6

Photographs of Mendieta's performances are carefully framed in such a way that the surrounding reality is hidden from the viewer. In a recent article, Durant adds that:

“reality, of course, was less miraculous; just outside the frame of *Imagen de Yagul* (Image from Yagul; 1973), for example, Mendieta's fellow graduate students at the University of Iowa were chatting and keeping an eye out for security guards, while her teacher Hans Breder danced around with camera in hand, taking multiple shots. Breder later said of this process: 'Ana's work translates beautifully into photography. The original action was not always riveting, but the process of photographing transformed the work.’”<sup>87</sup>

In this case photography becomes a significant part of the artist's subjectivity. The function of pictures is not only to act as a proof of the existence of the work, they become part of the creative process. Other artists however insisted on isolating documentary photography from their work. Hence, Christo and Jeanne Claude refused to assume that their work could be preserved in memory in the form of photographs. While they “accentuated photography's transparency – their putative ability to communicate a neutral, documentary truth –”, they “stressed the fact that



Illustration 31: "*Imagen de Yagul*", 1973, Ana Mendieta

<sup>87</sup> Mark Alice Durant (2010), *Photography & Performance*, Aperture no199, p.32

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the temporary work of art was no longer available”<sup>88</sup>. I must partially disagree with such an opinion, for that I doubt that photography can be neutral and transparent and this ironically appears clearly in the documentation of Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's work. They paid careful attention to the documentation of their work, from aesthetic considerations to copyright and ownership issues. One would not fail to notice that published pictures of their installations share many characteristics such as intense sun light, quasi absence of audience and regular reliance on bird's eye view. The careful control exerted upon the representation of their work is everything but neutral and transparent. It is closely monitored and bears the marks of those who commissioned it. With all due respect to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, I tend to consider these photographs as part of their artistic process, as much as is the careful planning and fund-raising activities preceding the construction of the work in its physical form. The attempt to isolate the physical work of art from the rest of the process seems to me somewhat artificial.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude justified their position by their will to insist on the transient nature of their installations, their vulnerability and their passing away. In my view, such a goal does not contradict with accepting documentation as a part of the artistic process and relinquish its putative objectivity. One way to tackle it is to consider the physical installation as the climax of the creative process. Neither what precedes it nor what follows

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88 Charles Green (1999), *Disappearance and photography in post-object art: Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, Afterimage 27-3, pp.13-15

should be disregarded. In a way, the installation, the performance or the sculpture constitutes a moment of dramatic intensity which is served by preparatory work and subsequent documentation. In fact, it is more than common that environmental artworks can only be understood as a part of the creative process, losing much of their meaning when isolated from it. Denis Oppenheim's "Time Line" (1968) is interesting as the combination of a performance in the environment (a cut in the ice that took ten minutes to execute) and the background information complementing it (the line follows the Canadian-American border which is also boundary between two time zones). This approach is a frontal rejection of the cannons of modernity according to which works of art are completely autonomous. To take into account what precedes and what follows the apex of the creative process, is to acknowledge that artists do not create in a vacuum, that they work in certain place at a certain time. Beyond, it makes it possible to creatively engage with the environment in its many dimensions, including cultural ones.



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### **Why to publish preparatory work?**

I mentioned earlier that the construction of the raft and the then unused kite was documented and published on Internet. One of my goal was to contribute back to the online community from which I had gathered know-how and inspiration. In addition of practical sides of the project, many blog posts dealt with more theoretical and artistic issues. For the purpose of this trip, I wrote short texts about books which inspired me in the early planning phase. I published a short analysis of Thoreau's *Walden*, concentrating mostly on his views on childhood. I tried to complement this by writing about Emerson and older philosophical sources which I considered to be closely related to Thoreau's approach. I also posted among other topics, texts about kites in the arts, documentation in environmental art, Finnish environmental artists, and the use of GPS. I believe that this preparatory work is common to many artists. Once a project is outlined, the practical sides of it need to be specified and the work needs to be situated in the greater artistic context. When applying for grants, setting exhibitions, artists must be able to “pitch” their work. The decision to publish writings all along the preparatory phase differs slightly in so that it does not go through the filter of time. It is a much more transparent method. I consider it to be as interesting as a book published after the work is completed. In a way it gives a much more honest account of the creative process. By proceeding in such a way, the artist cannot hide the potential shortcomings, failures or contradictions of the project but it is also an opportunity to get feedback. Artists do

not create in a vacuum. They are subjects to a whole range of influences, critics or suggestions. Online presence and publishing makes it possible to open the process up. Some artists may dislike it, either because of their lack of proficiency with computers or because a blog, unlike a book, is not a sensual object. This is to a large extent nostalgia. In my opinion, books are only one means among other. I wrote earlier that the widespread use of photography in documentation owed a lot to its ease of use. Nowadays, to write a blog costs close to nothing, is fast and comfortable. On the contrary, to publish a book remains expensive and technically complex.

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## **Video Blogging**

The journey which constitutes the climax of the project was published in the form of video clips posted daily from the woods and titled after the exact coordinates of the place from where they were shot. I have already explained how well this fitted the focus on identities. At this point, I would like to add a few words in relation with documentation. As much as publishing preparatory work on the go has not been a common practice in the history of environmental art, mostly because of the lack of technical solutions, publishing videos as soon as they were shot and not in the context of an exhibition is, to my knowledge, rather uncommon. In the case of land artists of the 1960s and 1970s, technical limitations are an obvious reason. Before the development of video technology, to shoot a film required heavy and rather fragile equipment. One will remember that the first consumer camcorder was released in by Sony no earlier than 1983. Technologies making instant publication are even more recent. Before the development of broadband Internet in the 2000's, the only available solution was to rely on television networks which was out of reach for most artists. It is striking to think that the first consumer camcorder weighted 2.5kg and its dimensions were approximately 125 x 220 x 357mm. In comparison, the smart phone I shot the videos with during the trip weights no more than 120g and is less than a centimetre thick. In addition of shooting reasonably high definition videos clips, it has editing and publishing capabilities. When thinking back to land artists, it is probable that some works would have been

documented differently with today's technological solutions. Works such as Peter Hutchinson's "Paracutin Volcano" (1970) heavily rely on decaying processes, that is on time dimension<sup>89</sup>. However, the work was publicized mostly through photographs and writings.

Today, it would be cheap and simple to document such a project with video or real-time broadcasting. One could argue that such devices would weaken the sense of absence which was a significant aspect of early land art exhibitions. I think that such an opinion is biased as it is once more to equate experience and visual sense. To me, to access to a real-time broadcast differs from standing on the



Illustration 32: "Paracutin Volcano", 1970, Peter Hutchinson

edge of a volcano's crater. There is still a strong sense of absence and online broadcasting only tackles the difficulty to capture temporal phenomenons with texts and photographs.

To come back to *Looking for Risto*, online publishing of videos made it possible get the most out of the strategic choice to develop a narrative on a day-to-day basis. In a sense, it is a more restrictive way to work than to shoot videos, edit them once back home and only then publish them. To work in this way forces the environment onto the art practice. In terms

<sup>89</sup> Susan Boettger (2004), *Earthworks: Art and the Landscapes of the Sixties*, Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, p.189

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of content, I knew I had to come up with a small performance or installation everyday and thus having to make do with the environment I was in. In practical terms, to work directly in the woods forces one to compromise with editing possibilities which excluded any advanced manipulation. Still, to rely on a mobile phone was profitable in terms of engagement as I did not need to set up heavy equipments every time I wanted to produce a new video clip. The only drawback was a dependency on electronics which ended up in partially jeopardizing the original plan because of a lack of sun.

In general, and building upon the experience of this project, I am convinced that technological developments in electronics offer an opportunity to environmental artists to renew their practice. Technology does not need to constitute the subject matter of the work. One does not need to abandon one's old practices and engage in web art. What is at stake is the mode of confrontation, the way to document art. To be able to shoot videos, edit them and publish them from a single device enlarges the field of possibilities. I believe further that to make use of Internet should not be thought of as a simple digital transposition of physical mediums such as books or gallery spaces. The digital space has its own limitations as much as it offers unprecedented possibilities. In this respect, Stanza's many web art works<sup>90</sup> using video feeds to generate the art piece in real-time is inspirational and gives a good idea of what modern communication technologies make possible. To give but one example, with

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90 See for instance "*America is Bleeding*", [http://www.stanza.co.uk/new\\_york\\_stories/index.html](http://www.stanza.co.uk/new_york_stories/index.html), retrieved September 2012

“Soundcities”<sup>91</sup> (2002-2011) Stanza initiated a global sound mapping of cities worldwide. Interestingly the interface allows for a participative approach. The artist is the initiator but contribution in the form of sound samples is opened to everyone.

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91 Stanza, *Soundcities* (2002-2011), <http://www.soundcities.com/>, retrieved September 2012

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### **An exhibition proposal**

The two previous sections concentrate on documentation published online. Blogging was perfectly suited for the publication of short notes constituting the bulk of the preparatory work. Video blogging appeared to be an interesting way to publicize the work in the making. At the time I am writing these lines, there is still an exhibition to be held, serving as a retrospective of *Looking for Risto*. One could wonder why to rely on this many modes of confrontation to bring my work to the audience. In my view, the possibility to use different means for publicizing my work is an opportunity to deal with different sides of the project and reach different audiences. Each of them have advantages and inconvenient. It should also be noted that none of them will ever be completely transparent. In the case of the sculptural works of land artists, to go on site and experience the work in its context certainly comes very close to a complete engagement with the work of art. In the case of *Looking for Risto*, because of its performance nature, mediation is unavoidable to reach the audience. In this sense, I think that mediation is at the heart of environmental artists' work. As Samuel Jones wrote, the description of a sunset will never be as fulfilling as seeing a sunset. Still, the description can be in its own right touching, beautiful, creepy and so on. The description is an aesthetic object as much as its object is one in the first place.

Coming back to the exhibition to be set about *Looking for Risto*, the idea is to build upon the journey I went for, in order to produce something else of it. It would be illusory to

think that I could convey all the feelings and impressions that arose during three weeks in an installation. If there is to be an installation, this one becomes a work of art itself. My position is quite close to that of Richard Long who stated that:

“The outdoor and indoor works are complementary, although I would have to say that nature, the landscape, the walking, is at the heart of my work and informs the indoor works. But the art world is usually received ‘indoors’ and I do have a desire to present real work in public time and space, as opposed to photos, maps and texts, which are by definition ‘second hand’ works”.<sup>92</sup>

I would only slightly depart from his position which makes a clear distinction between texts and photographs on one side and installations on the other. I believe that texts and photographs can as well be art works. What is at stake here is to take in consideration the space in which art is displayed. To show it in a book, on Internet or in a gallery is not a mere detail. Each of these spaces must be used for what they are best suited for. Keeping this in mind, I wish to avoid displaying too lengthy texts or relying solely on videos. Only few visitors would take the time to read long texts. Similarly, I consider that films projected in a gallery space would be as good when seen from a computer screen at home. Here, I would like to underline that this is my personal interpretation. Once more, I consider that

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<sup>92</sup> Artist statement, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/richard-long-heaven-and-earth/explore-exhibition/richard-long-2>, retrieved September 2012



documentation, in all its possible forms, is part of my art practice and thus leaves room for subjectivism.

The exhibition, titled after the eponymous project *Looking for Risto* will take place in Lume Gallery in the premises of the School of Art, Design and Architecture of the Aalto University. The space does not meet the canons of the art gallery, usually described as a “white cube”. The Lume Gallery, situated at the entrance of the school is about twenty meters long, five meters wide and four meters high. The lighting of the space is not as neutral as it usually is in art galleries: natural light penetrates the space through a glass ceiling. The wooden walls are beige and the floors dark brown. This imposes strong constraints on the way art can be displayed. Mostly, the quality of any video projection would be poor in such a setting. Besides, it is not possible to completely



*Illustration 33: Lume Gallery in Helsinki*

block the way through the gallery because of safety regulations. Finally, the proportions of the space itself are uncommon: it gives more the feeling of a long corridor. All these constraints have to be taken in consideration in the design of the exhibition. The original idea is to set the raft roughly in the centre of the exhibition space with its sail up and oars out. My wish is that it would be exhibited in conditions ready to go on water. Further on, speakers will be installed under the deck: if the raft cannot rock on the concrete floor of the gallery, at least the idea can be implied with the sound of waves gently breaking on the raft's freeboards. It is clear that once displaced in a gallery space, the raft is not so much a vessel anymore but a symbol of it. Because of practical constraints, it is not possible for the audience to directly experience the journey and symbols and metaphors are the only way to convey the feelings that arose from it. Hence the boat acts as the symbol of the journey, or to be more precise of *this* journey. It is not a symbol of the idea of a journey but of the very specific journey during which I looked for Risto. This explains why I chose to exhibit the raft rather than showing a picture of it. This way, The audience may not to be mistaken about the reality of the journey. It did really happen. It is a true story. The boat bears the marks of the travel. The audience can climb on it, touch it, smell it. It is not just an image.

I also plan to make use of the length of the gallery. Instead of trying to force a generic work inside its peculiar proportion, my intent is to design the work for the specificities of the space. The length of the gallery can easily be used to reinforce the idea of a journey. Indeed, if the work occupies the whole length of the gallery, it is practically impossible to visually

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embrace it in its entirety. Instead, the viewer must walk along the gallery, enjoying one part of it after the other and in doing so, going for a journey, would this one be of the simplest kind: twenty meters down a gallery.

At the time I am writing this thesis, I plan to display two twenty meters long roles of paper, one on each of the gallery's wall. The first one will display a stretched map of the area I crossed and as many qr-codes as there are video clips from the journey. Each qr-code will directly link to a video clip. They will be arranged according to the relative positions of the places from which the videos were shot or posted. As I have explained before, I do not consider Lume gallery to be suited to show videos. The look of small television screens or computer monitors would not fit either with the whole project's aesthetic. To use qr-codes is a way to link to this other part of the work without jeopardizing the overall aesthetic harmony. For some time, I contemplated the option of editing the many video clips in order to produce a film which would include them all. To include one monitor may have been a more acceptable compromise. However, I have argued earlier that in my view, to work in different spaces should not be reduced to a transposition of a piece from one space to the other. The videos were originally shot and edited with a mobile phone. Their short length and the modest image quality are suited for watching on a mobile phone or on computer screen, not as a film. In this context, the use of qr-codes appears particularly suited: in essence, they are drawings with the special capacity to be interpreted by smart phones as gates. Whether the audience will make use of them or not is not of my concern. The point of the exhibition is not force

**What are QR codes?**

Originally developed for the automotive industry, QR codes (Quick Response Codes) are a type of matrix barcode which recently became popular, especially for use in mobile operating systems. QR code scanners are usually capable of recognizing the type of information stored in the code and redirect to the target, would it be a URL, a location on map, an email and so on.

There are several versions of QR code resolutions with corresponding information storage capacities. Still, all of them share some features such as orientation symbols, format information, error correction level, message length and type of information.

Because of error correction possibilities (up to 30% of the message), QR codes can be modified for esthetic purposes as it is usual in marketing.



"Looking for Risto"  
coded in Ver1  
alphanumeric QR Code

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content onto the viewer. It is an invitation. There is a parallel to be drawn with the notion of engagement referred to at length in the first part of this thesis. Engagement is a voluntary act, it cannot be imposed from the outside. When wandering on the lakes, it is left open to anyone to get involved with the environment, to try to understand it beyond the vista. I hope that the strategy I want to rely on in the upcoming exhibition will efficiently convey this idea.

The second stripe of paper will most probably hold the title of the work, *Looking for Risto*, in very large characters with possibly sketches of various images of the journey. Lastly, the viewer will be offered the possibility to browse through the present Master's thesis. Above the stand on which the thesis will be set, I will display the two only artefacts brought back from the journey: Risto's mask and hands.



## SOME WORDS TO CONCLUDE

The objectives of this book and, more largely, of this project, were manifold. More obviously, this is a Master's thesis and so aimed at making use of the knowledge and methods acquired during the last two years of studies. But the subject, that of identities, is more personal. In this way, this thesis was the opportunity to engage in a more systematic analysis of questions arising regularly as a displaced individual. Lastly and probably most importantly, *Looking for Risto* was an opportunity to reflect on my art practice and to draw the outlines of future projects and fields of inquiry. Because art is a process, because identities are dynamic, because academic research is inexhaustible, this book is in the end more an open door than a final statement.

When I applied to the MA program in Environmental Arts, I remember I mentioned a journey on Saimaa I was about to go for and openly hoped to be able to share the experience with my hypothetical professors and classmates. It took two years and a Master's thesis to fulfil this wish. This work comes as a conclusion to an intense period of studies

during which I acquired the necessary knowledge to situate my art practice in the greater artistic context, to open up to new ideas, to develop an informed opinion on the work of other artists. As an art student, my background is uncommon: I come from social science and worked in the field for some years before making the radical decision to fully dedicate myself to arts. This was no small bet. I hope this thesis to show that the two years of studies were a successful enterprise.

When coming to the subject matter of the current project, I have underlined enough that identities are not fixed, that they are subject to a whole set of influences. In the end I have found Risto... and burnt him. To identify with nature, to feel a particular attachment with the Finnish lakes, to enjoy silent retreats in the woods, is not reserved to those who grew up in this land. The forest is not more Finnish than French. The forest knows no ideologies and borders. It is opened to anyone who would make the effort to get to know it, to spend the necessary time in it. We have seen that arts hold a particular position in the process of identification. The time of unanimous idealization of nature in the service of nationalist projects is gone. Similarly, to reject nature and to uncritically adopt transnational values such as modernity is not an option anymore. Its negative externalities have been informed enough. The solution I propose is to insist on the notion of involvement. I consider that any given environment cannot be taken in consideration from an outsider's position. One needs to directly, physically and mentally get involved with it. In this thesis, I suggest that this involvement needs not necessarily to rest on national cultural background but can instead



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stem from a transnational cultural corpus for which nature is not a mere commodity. To put it short, to kill Risto, to say that “he was me”, is to reconcile the local with the global. It is to claim that although I am French, I too can identify with Finnish nature.

On a more general level, this Master's thesis has been the occasion to outline the directions both my art and my research will take in the future. To base one's art on wanders in the woods is not new. Many artists have done so and insist on the need of engagement. A more promising field of enquiry for future work is the conditions of integration of modern means of documentation with the ever renewed return to nature. Stevenson wrote travel journals, Gallen Kallela painted idealised and symbolic landscapes, Hamish Fulton uses words and photographies to document his journeys, Jussi Kivi sets nostalgic installations. The primary material of these artists is the same: a strong sense of engagement with nature, a journey in the woods, an adventure. Their talent was to express the feelings bursting from there with skill and in an inventive way for their times. Today's technologies open up a new field for creativity. Land artists of the 1960s wanted to escape from the gallery. Technological developments make it more possible today than ever before. Audience can be met any time and any where. New modes of confrontation must be invented in order not to engage in a simple enterprise of digital transcription but to fully take advantage of the possibilities offered by modern means of communication. In *Looking for Risto*, I modestly tried to suggest possible directions but it will take a lot more time and efforts to develop truly innovative ways to confront the audience with environmental art. To cite but a few possibilities, after this

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project, I got interested in qr-codes, augmented reality and real-time broadcasting, as many technologies I wish to make use of in future projects.

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